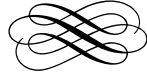


An Analysis of Christian Origins



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An Analysis of Christian Origins

As a rule, it is more difficult to prevent a man from believing than to make him believe.

Renan (*Marcus-Aurelius*)

The abnegation of reason is not the evidence of faith, but the confession of despair.

Lightfoot (*St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*)

I. Did Christianity come from Jerusalem?

It has long been believed that Jerusalem was the birthplace of Christianity. It is there that Jesus Christ would have been crucified; it is from there that the apostles would have gone out to evangelize the Gentile world. This assertion is based solely on Christian texts that were written two or three generations after the events they claim to describe, and which have only made their way to us — greatly modified — thanks to a few fourth-century manuscripts.

This is tantamount to arguing that Christianity was born in Jerusalem of the first century AD because copyists (from the fourth century) of manuscripts (from the second century) that were religious, not historical, in nature attest to it. Is it not begging the question, i.e. a circular argument, to prove something uncertain with something else equally uncertain?

The more that time passes, and with it our reading and research, the more skeptical we must become with regard to first Christian church in Jerusalem, which would have been the mother of the other Christian communities.

We have begun to think that there was no Christianity, strictly the speaking, before the fall of the Temple in 70. Certainly, there existed, in Judaea, on the margins of the official religion, groups of messianists, apocalypticists, Gnostics (before the name appeared in the second century), and mystery cults, but the people who comprised those groups were not yet Christians, even if they weren't orthodox Jews¹.

This text reproduces that of *Cahier rationaliste* No. 139, January 1961, which ran out of copies very quickly. The author supplemented it first for the English edition (translated by Bradlaugh Bonner), and again for the present edition.

¹ Not to mention the Diaspora Jews.

The term “Christian” dates to the years 145–150.

The term “Christian” did not appear in manuscripts until the second century, around 145–150, with Justin, Athenagoras, and Theophilus.² What complicates the situation is that the term was retroactively applied to some earlier Jewish sects whose descendants had gathered into communities that would go on to form the great Church; what we have there is a historical usurpation, a pious anachronism much like if we were to speak of “French” troops that fought under Clovis.

The so-called Christians who were watched, banished, and sometimes condemned by Rome during the first century AD and part of the second, were not Christians, but were Jewish fanatics who proclaimed the end of the world, and therefore of Rome, and who purported to hasten this end, whether by rebelling through the Messiahs they produced, or by waging a campaign of dire predictions, slander, and even attacks against the Roman empire.

When one repeats, on the basis of widespread opinion, that the Christians were originally confused with Jews, this assertion is dictated only by the conviction that the first Christians were Palestinian Jews, and that they appeared around the year 30 AD. Without realizing it, one is molding the story to fit a hypothesis that, though it may merit respect due to its age, can probably be abandoned without inconvenience to those who are motivated by personal interests. In reality, when the Romans speak of Jews in the first century, we must not make them say something other than what they actually say; they are referring to Jews, not Christians. It is shortly after the revolt of 132, perhaps toward 140, that we see — thanks to Marcion — the breakup of a Gnostic sect that had been formed in Rome, and in which some Jewish elements had begun to distort doctrine of Gentile origin.

We will revisit this question later in our analysis, but it was necessary to bring up these facts at the beginning in order to avoid confusion.

The first Church spoke Greek.

If the first Church existed in Jerusalem, we are obligated to highlight a fact that is of great consequence: with the language spoken in this community by its leaders and followers being Hebrew or Aramaic, it would follow that accounts of their activities ought to have been preserved for us through Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts originating with its members; however, on the contrary, it is thanks to documents written in Greek and destined for Greek-

² With regard to the “witnesses” of Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, see further below.

speaking communities — after the year 70 — that this Palestinian tradition, very weak by the way, has reached us.

Furthermore, the Jewish Christ of Jerusalem would have to have had a Hebrew name: Yehoshua. Yet, this name never appeared in its Hebrew form. It first took the form of the Greek “Iesous” and then became “Jesus” in Latin.

It is equally asserted that Jesus Christ spoke Aramaic and that he probably knew Hebrew. As a consequence, whenever he alluded to the Scriptures (Matt. 26.54; Luke 24.27, 45; John 5.39) while addressing the Jews of Jerusalem, he would have to have cited the Hebrew Bible and not the Greek version of the Bible in order to be understood by them. Yet this is precisely the opposite of what is recorded. Not only do the Epistles of Paul and Acts cite the Bible in its Greek version, the Septuagint, but even the Gospels do so when they purport to relay the very words of Jesus. It would follow that if Jesus gave his speeches in Greek, then he wasn’t in Jerusalem.³

The same holds true for Peter. It appears that he too cites the Old Testament in the Greek Septuagint to the Jews in Jerusalem; but his “oversights” are not limited to that. After reading Acts (in 1.18-19), few will be able to believe what we are told there.

Is it possible — if he was speaking to the Jews of Jerusalem or of the region in Aramaic — that Peter would have told them that the field bought by Judas was called Akeldamach *in their language* and that it has been necessary to translate what the word meant (field of blood) *into Greek* for an Aramaic-speaking audience?

Another observation shows the same thing. It is the Alexandrian canon of the Bible written in Greek (not the Palestinian canon written in Hebrew) that the Jews in Egypt used, after the apostles and early fathers. As Irenaeus (confirmed by Origen and Jerome) observes: *The apostles followed the Septuagint version...for Peter, and John, and Matthew, and Paul, and the others as well as their followers, gave prophetic oracles just as the version of the elders (the Septuagint) contains them.* It is only later, starting with Origen, that — due to the requirements of their arguments with the Jews — the Fathers are forced to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

Renan, who realized the difficulty but hesitated to draw conclusions, sought an explanation that, in truth, was only an assumption that didn’t explain anything. He thought that from the second or third year after the death of Jesus, the Greek language had overrun the first community where it was previously dominant. One would like to know what extraordinary event could have brought about such a change, in Jerusalem of all places.

³ We should add that the Synoptics do not recount any miracles by Jesus in Jerusalem except for the “miracle” of the fig tree that we find only in Mark (11.12–14) and Matthew (21.18–19), and which is evidently an interpolation.

If the Church of Jerusalem had existed since the beginning of Christianity, and if it had played the guiding role that has been attributed to it, it would have necessarily have sent directives to other Christian communities, whether in Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. How do we explain why these letters were not saved while those of Paul and others less important were? Why were they not even mentioned or referred to by the Church Fathers? Why didn't copyists and secondary editors of the holy scriptures (if they were experts on interpolations and the writing of false epistles) feel the need to ascribe their writings to James, Peter⁴ or the Church itself and leave such collections of documents as a legacy that would establish their importance and authority? If no such documents, real or fake, have reached us, wouldn't it be because there was no Christian church in Jerusalem, and the scribes (around the year 100) did not yet suspect that there had ever been one?

Another surprise: there exists no first-century Jewish attestation of the Christian church, which is equally ignored by Gentile contemporaries. This silence is even more serious than the silence concerning Christ, since there is absolutely no explanation for it.

Wherever glimpses of Christianity can be found in Jewish writings, "it is a Christian hand that has prepared that impression for us, either by recasting the words of the original, or by inserting parasitic phrases. Forgers with varying degrees of skill have subsequently profited from the silence of known writers in order to try to gain prestige among the naive, sometimes to the benefit of Christ and his followers, and sometimes to their detriment..."⁵

In reality, no one around the year 110 would have had any recollection whatsoever of historical facts that had taken place in Palestine around the year 30. We can be quite certain that the apologists of the 11th century knew no more than we do about the subject, and that their sources of information were the same ones we have at our disposal today.

The fall of Jerusalem is ignored by the New Testament.

On the other hand, the war and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 — significant events not only for the Jews but also for the Christians, if they existed — are not mentioned at all in the New Testament. It would have been worth mentioning either that a number of the Christians had escaped the disaster, or that most of them had been exterminated. Thus, an

⁴ The catholic orthodox epistles include one epistle attributed to James and two to Peter, but they are late, say nothing about life in Jerusalem, and confine themselves to very general matters of doctrine.

⁵ Guignebert, *Le Christ*, p. 16–17. These textual corrections were probably not made before the 130s.

event so important for the history of the fledgling Christian Church, so worthy of being recalled to memory by men, is absent from our documents. No writing has transmitted to us the fate of this Church upon the fall of the Temple.

Eusebius, who wrote between 300 and 340, reports to us in his *Ecclesiastical History* (III. 5.3) that the Christians left Palestine as of the year 66 and headed to Perea in anticipation of the arrival of the Roman army and in order to escape the calamities of the war.⁶ This escape was due, supposedly, to an oracle revealed to the leaders in Jerusalem, warning them to go to Pella. Accordingly, we are told that all the Christians abandoned Jerusalem and Judea completely in order to go “to Pella”. We have here an admission that these “Christians” would have been very few in number, seeing as how they all took refuge in Pella; it would not then have been a major exodus, but rather the departure of a sect that was not necessarily Judeo-Christian, but which was able to be described as Christian two hundred and fifty years later.

Moreover, Pella of Perea, one of the cities of the Decapolis, was Greek in origin and culture; it is difficult to imagine that Jewish Christians would have chosen such a city. Later, according to Epiphanius, they would have returned to Jerusalem, and Eusebius informs us that in the time of Hadrian, the Church of Aelia (the rebuilt and repopulated Jerusalem) was composed of Gentiles. There is no indication of these Christians from Pella at the end of the first century or during the second century; if they established themselves in Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina) after 132, everything suggests they were “Hellenists” in nature, and, despite Eusebius, who may have been mistaken in good faith, there is no evidence that they formerly lived in Jerusalem; strong reasons (too numerous to describe here) allow us to consider the flight of the Jewish Christians to Pella as impossible.⁷

Whatever the case, we do not hear of the Church in Jerusalem before 70; it did not take part in the life and concerns of Christianity; everything happened as though no one knew it had existed after that date.

An unknown and inexplicable “rapid mutation”

This extraordinary phenomenon plunges a number of historians into a perplexity that they cannot conceal despite the “explanations” they provide. Thus, in recent work, we can find

⁶ J. Burckhard, a renowned historian, denounces Eusebius as “the first historian in antiquity who wrote in completely bad faith.”

⁷ See Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem*, London, S.I.C.K., 1957.

the involuntary admission of the disarray that those who assert a Jerusalemite Christianity before the city's fall as a dogma must contend with:⁸

Besieged Jerusalem fell in the summer of 70. The burnt Temple was reduced to part of a wall, the city to a mere village. The survivors were sold as slaves or were exiled; Judaism survived only in the synagogues of the diaspora. This blow against Judaism had repercussions for Jewish Christians... A new era began for Christianity, which from this point on turned its back completely on its Jewish origins and developed only within a Gentile environment.

We underline the last two assertions that show how casually one can write history. Nothing allows us to claim that the fall of Jerusalem caused harm toward preexisting Jewish Christians; no one knows anything about that. As for the fact of a total reversal of Christianity from being Jewish as it had been originally to being essentially Gentile, it is prudent to remain skeptical in this regard. Mutations so rapid in matters of religion, and so fundamental since they concern the faith's very origins, are rare if they have occurred at all; in any case, such an event would merit serious study and acceptable clarifications.

This fact has not escaped Marcel Simon, who just republished a short book, *Les Premiers chrétiens* (appearing in the "Que Sais-je?" collection). Here is what he says about it:

Originating in Palestine, from the preaching of a Jew, whose first disciples were also Jews, and who targeted Jews, Christianity proceeds in a direct line from Judaism. However, it soon left the Jewish framework in which it was originally confined. Right from the first generation, the Christian message was proclaimed to Gentiles, who welcomed it with more enthusiasm than Israel... it is in the Greco-Roman world that it established a foothold and grew...

This Palestinian sect, obscure at best, developed during this period into a universal religion... The documentation we have at our disposal for shedding light on this problem is very limited and singularly difficult to make use of. The chronology (of the Gospels) is very controversial; all four seem to have been written down in the current form after 70... But the elements of tradition that they contain, oral tradition for starters, date back to considerably earlier than 70. Cautiously interpreted, they can provide indirect information about the communities that produced them...

Thus, it would be on the basis of a few religious documents whose interpretation requires caution that we get to be indirectly informed on the abnormal development of the new religion. These stylistic precautions amount to nothing and will be persuasive only to believers.⁹ We instead feel that a religion usually becomes dominant from a position of strength; it is not after

⁸ *Hist. Univ.*, Encycl. de la Pléiade, book I, p. 1020. Paris, 1956. The chapter is signed by Jean-Rémy Palanque.

⁹ Voltaire was undoubtedly correct when he wrote: *There are follies we respect provided that they show concern for respectable things.* (Dict. philos. Art.: *Lettres.*)

being overrun in Jerusalem that Christianity would have conquered the world if it hadn't already been established.

The "historical" situation behind the purported social phenomenon thus described is much simpler if the mother Church was not in Jerusalem, if Christianity was therefore born in Gentile territory, and if it was progressively Judaized later. The hypothesis of a Jewish origin complicates the problem; it does not solve it. The hypothesis of a Christianity born among the Gentiles — in other words, far from Jerusalem — a hypothesis contrary to a tradition found in writings that lack historical value, would appear to be plausible.

Paul before Christ?

A work from the third century provides us with some information that, as far as we know, no one has made use of. It is the *Clementine Homilies*. The writer was preoccupied with the question of dualism; he thought that, ever since Adam, *the bad element, which is feminine, has always preceded the good element, which is masculine*, and he gave a list of syzygies that had appeared after Adam. Thus, we have Abel opposed by Cain, Moses by Aaron, the Son of Man by John the Baptist, *Paul by Peter, and Christ by the Antichrist*. Accordingly, Paul had gone to the Gentiles before Peter, and Peter had "succeeded" him as *a light against the darkness, knowledge against ignorance, healing against sickness*.¹⁰

But what interests us most of all is to learn that *the gospel of falsehood came first, taught by a deceiver, and then, after the destruction of the holy place, came the gospel of truth, taught in secret*. Moreover, it is extremely curious that Christ would come after Paul according to this list of the two principles compiled by the *Clementines*.

Let's remember the second passage emphasized by us and that it means this: Before the fall of Jerusalem, Paul, a deceiver, preached a gospel, but after 70, the true gospel came to rectify this heresy. It wasn't known until that time "because it had been taught in secret", an edifying euphemism to be interpreted as an admission that the late writing of the gospels was meant to rewrite history, which confirms our doubts regarding the existence of a Christian Church in Jerusalem before the city's fall in 70.

The early texts of the Pauline Epistles and of Acts were not talking about the Church in Jerusalem; it is after the death of Paul and of the writer of Acts that editors wanted to provide

¹⁰ See O. Cullmann, *Problème littéraire et historique du roman pseudo-clémentin*, Paris, Alcan, 1930, particularly pages 88 and 89. The anteriority of Paul is suggested, on the other hand, by the fact that Paul was converted by a luminous vision and that he went to preach Christ among the Gentiles without having seen, heard, or consulted with the apostles of Jerusalem, who probably did not yet exist in his time.

information on this early community that they were the first to imagine; their contradictory insertions provide only vague, doubtful information; as Judaizers, they wanted to associate themselves with an ancient group closer to the holy city than they were; their Christianity claimed to be Jewish and sought to be the fulfillment of prophecy; the paradoxical result was that they were not able to convince the Jews, but they did succeed in persuading the Gentiles. In fact, Christianity only succeeded outside of Judaea — first in the lands that spoke Greek, and then in those that spoke Latin. How can it be believed, under these conditions, that the Mother Church of Christianity was able to establish itself in Jerusalem and survived there for some forty years, from 30 to 70?

The first Christians did not know about the “Twelve Apostles”.

The New Testament offers a glimpse of the origins of Christianity: first disciples and Jesus’ small inner circle, and then deacons and apostles; but it is the apostles who, in Christian texts, receive all the attention and speculation over the others. As an apologist wrote in 1926, *after the death of Jesus, the story of the apostles became the story of the Church itself*,¹¹ but whether this story is true or not is precisely what we want to know.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was surrounded by disciples and not by apostles at the beginning of his ministry: it was the disciples who were called Christians, not the apostles, and it was the Hellenistic deacons who left to evangelize the nations, not the apostles; they are inserted into our texts in an artificial manner — their title of “apostle” is found only ten times in our Gospels, while the term “disciple” appears 238 times — and they form a sort of supreme, stationary jury composed of twelve members, a symbolic number. Of the twelve individuals whose names have been told to us (including Judas), we know nearly nothing aside from certain facts concerning Simon Peter, James, and John.

In reality, before the invention of the Twelve, there were other apostles (of whom Paul is the most famous) who are not mentioned in the Gospels — for example, Apollos, Barnabas, Sylvanus, Epaphrodite, Andronicus, and Junias. Paul ignored the Twelve, but the interpolator of the Twelve excluded Paul and his companions from the Upper Room, the surroundings in which he placed Jesus, an earthly man.

And it is precisely this conception of the so-called “Twelve Apostles” that allows us to doubt their existence and, in any case, the Palestinian origin of the teachings of Jesus.

¹¹ “Apôtres” (col. 785), *Dict. de la Bible*, by E. Le Camus

That the latter pits the Jews of Jerusalem and his own family against him would already seem amazing enough, but that the disciples he would have chosen would be completely oblivious to his teaching goes beyond the bounds of plausibility.

The evangelists have Jesus say to his disciples and apostles: *You are without intelligence... you do not understand...* (Matt. 15.16; 16.9–11; Mark 6.52, 7.18, 8.17–21). Luke adds (18.34): *The disciples did not understand, his words were hidden from them, and his meaning escaped them*, while the Synoptics relate another fact: Peter, who did not understand Christian doctrine at all, was severely rebuked by Jesus: *Get behind me, Satan... your thoughts are not those of God, but those of men* (Matt. 16.23; Mark 8.33). Under such conditions, can we reasonably believe in Jesus' choice of such propagandists — who, moreover, were going to wait for his death to deliver their very limited preaching — and in the development of his teachings in such an environment?

The Synoptic Gospels are unaware of all the missions that would have been carried out by the Twelve. That is why Luke puts them on the road in 9.6 and then immediately has them return in verse 10 (the intervening verses contain an interpolation concerning Herod) without our knowing where the apostles had gone, or the results of their missions — since he himself knew nothing more.

Nevertheless, let's try to find out what the function of this committee of the Twelve would have been. Paul's Epistles portray the government of the Church as being centralized in Jerusalem and composed of three pillars: James, the brother of the Lord, assisted by Cephas Peter and John. The Gospels present Peter sometimes as "standing among the brethren", which means that he did not preside over them, and sometimes as the undisputed leader of the Twelve, which would not have included James.¹² However, the Epistles depict a Paul who is superior to the three pillars,¹³ the so-called super-apostles, and who is bringing to the Gentiles a religion that was personally revealed to him, and which owes nothing to Moses or to the Law.

When we examine the texts that give contradictory responses to essential questions, we became aware that they show evidence of heated debates that took place between the sects of the second century. Here, the apostles, the Twelve, replace the first disciples; there, it is Peter who is inserted into the verses; elsewhere, it is James, while in many places we want to turn Paul, the enemy of circumcision, into a Jew who comes to Jerusalem to request authorization from James, Peter and John, who are gathered for the occasion, and to receive from them the right to preach a doctrine contrary to theirs, which is inconceivable.

¹² Only if, as we think, the apostle James, son of Zebedee and brother of John, is the same character as James, brother of the Lord and dignitary of the Church in Jerusalem. Cf. *Cahier Renan*, Nos. 15–16, "Les Apôtres et saint Pierre."

¹³ As far as "pillars" go, this is one too many. The entrance to the temple only had two pillars.

The Church of Jerusalem is a secondary, artificial creation.

These late, obvious, clumsy, and contradictory efforts to locate Christian origins in Palestine and to attempt, without success, to create a picture of the first “government” of the Jerusalem Church really show that the writers of the New Testament had no information on this matter available to them.

When we read the Acts of the Apostles, the depiction of Jerusalem as the apostles’ centre of activity appears to be very artificial. After the Resurrection, the apostles take permanent charge within the city; they never leave, except to come back; without them, Jerusalem ceases to be the centre of the Church. It becomes the centre again on the occasion of the famous council of Acts 15, but that is the last time. Henceforth, it is no longer the Jerusalem Church that sends representatives to oversee the expansion of Christianity as it had been so far (Acts 8.14, 9.32, 11.22, 15.1, 15.30); it is Paul who will visit the Churches whenever he deems it necessary, and it is Paul who writes to them.

From the day they no longer reside in Jerusalem, the Apostles disappear. After 16.4, the word “apostle” no longer appears in the book of Acts; Paul will no longer be an apostle, and no one will be greater than him.

However, if we remember that the Gospels that tell us about Jesus are later than the Epistles that inform us about Paul, we can observe that Paul is the first religious hero that the Christian scriptures know about.

We are permitted to suppose, then, that the Jerusalem Church was invented to “rehabilitate” Paul and his activities, and to back-date the establishment of the apostolate and Jewish Christian propaganda to a time before Paul; once those results are achieved, there is no further need to tell the rest of the story about a church that never existed.

A. Loisy, having identified some serious interpolations that can be found in Acts, said this of its editor: *He has fully succeeded in deceiving the Church on some of the circumstances surrounding its origins, which it was already ready to forget.*

Maurice Goguel (*La naissance du Christianisme*) confirms for us that *we have nothing to go on for the oldest history of Jerusalemite Christianity other than the book of Acts*, in which the writer used *various traditions legendary in appearance...that he appears not to have always understood... More seriously, he naively projected the situation in his own time into his portrayal of the ancient Jerusalem Church... Very attentive criticism is therefore necessary...*

One example shows us that extreme caution is needed with regard to Christian traditions. It is believed that in early 44, Herod Agrippa I had the apostle James alone killed and Peter imprisoned, but that the latter escaped miraculously; was he even arrested? There

were no further difficulties for Peter or for the Twelve in Jerusalem, where the Church was now headed by another James who was also executed either in 62 or in 70 on the eve of the war. This James, who appears only after the death of James the brother of the Lord, would have been himself a son of Mary;¹⁴ like the other James, he was called to the apostolate around the year 29; he became the city's bishop while the first James held a prominent position at the Council of Jerusalem (which took place in 44). Both were killed by Herod Agrippa; they appear to have been the same person, split into two, and were able to die in 44 as well as in 62 or on the eve of the revolt of 66–70, which demonstrates the inconsistency of the stories that tell us about them.

On the subject of the second James — whose death is recounted in two very different ways — Goguel observes that those who died with him were not Christians, because if they had been, the Jerusalem Church, with its great paucity of martyrs, would have remembered them; furthermore, this would be the only incident of bloodshed for the period between 44 and 70. We would be tempted, then, to conclude that if a James existed, it was only the first one. But Origen rules out this conclusion.¹⁵ He says on three occasions that the destruction of Jerusalem was a punishment inflicted on the Jews for the murder of James. Such a belief shows the enormous importance of the character. However, there is an interpolated passage in Josephus (*Ant.* XX.9) of no small interest. This James, “brother of Jesus called the Christ”, met his death at the hands of the High Priest Ananias, who was then replaced by Jesus son of Damneus, who in turn was succeeded by Jesus son of Gamaliel, these events taking place around 62–63, i.e. on the eve of the Jewish revolt.

Whatever he may have been, this James was not a Christian. According to Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* II.23.6), Hegesippus reportedly claimed (and Epiphanius confirms) that James was the High Priest and chief priest of sacrifices, i.e. the leader of the Jews. Therefore, he would not have been a Christian.

The search for the first “Pope”

According to Eusebius, “it is said” that James was succeeded as bishop by Simeon, son of Clopas and cousin of the Lord — a tradition that was started in order to establish a legitimate lineage of Jerusalemite bishops but is undoubtedly fanciful. The High Priest of Jerusalem would certainly not have tolerated the existence, opposite the Temple, of a succession of pontiffs

¹⁴ “Les Apôtres et saint Pierre”, *Cahier Renan*, Nos. 15–16.

¹⁵ *Contra Celsum*, I.47, II.13; *Commentary on Matthew*, X.17.

belonging to a heretical cult; this sect was not Christian and did not conduct its activities in Jerusalem.

Eusebius then tells us that the two grandsons of Jude, brother of the Lord, were taken before Domitian (around 90), who saw them as simple, harmless farmers and allowed them to go free. Returning to their country, these humble men would have guided “the entire Church”, both as martyrs and as the kindred of the Lord, up until the time of Trajan (98-117).

Of course, this is a fairy tale¹⁶ that duplicates what is reported about Simeon: that he was also of David’s bloodline and James’s successor as bishop of Jerusalem, and that he was martyred at the age of 120 around the year 107. He was supposedly denounced as a “Christian” by descendants of David who were then executed in turn. A normal finish to a double legend based on erroneous assumptions.

Eusebius delves even further into fantasy; he produces a list of purported bishops of Jerusalem divided into two groups, the first composed of fifteen names up to the time of Hadrian, all Jews, and the second beginning after 134 (Jerusalem having become Aelia Capitolina) and being composed only of uncircumcised bishops, the first of whom was a certain Mark.

We can observe in passing that, if we exclude James and Simeon from the list, there are thirteen bishops between the time of Trajan and the fall of Jerusalem, i.e. twenty years. This is not absolutely impossible, but it is surprising, since this rapid rate of replacement is unusual. Eusebius’s list is unanimously considered to be worthless.¹⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to ask ourselves what kind of relationship could have existed between the first bishops of Jerusalem who descended from David via the family of Jesus and those of Rome who, at least in theory, received their “authority” from Saint Peter, who got his from Christ.

Nor is there any need to wonder why Domitian, who is supposed to have made the Davidic leaders of the Jerusalem Christians appear before him, would not have subjected the bishop of Rome, their correspondent in the eternal city, to questioning. That is, unless the persecution of 95-96 in Rome directed against everyone who lived as Jews corresponds to our assumption, but nothing allows us to say that any “Christian” leader died on this occasion; the incident involved only the Jews.

Certainly, we know the names of purported bishops of Rome, but, since it is known that those under Domitian might have been named Evaristus, Alexander, and Sixtus, and that we

¹⁶ The search for the descendants of David is a kind of leitmotif in ecclesiastical history. This preoccupation was periodically attributed to Vespasian, Domitian, and Trajan.

¹⁷ Notably by Harnack, Schlatter, Schwartz, Ed. Meyer, and Goguel. Harnack believes that there was no monarchical episcopate in Jerusalem before 134.

have no information on these “candidates” to the historical pontificate, it might be best to admit our ignorance and not add imaginary facts to a story that, despite its inadequacy, is already abundantly provided.

However, we can highlight an event in 134, the establishment in Gentile Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina) of a Christian community engaged in Jewish practices — if this event actually took place. Most contemporary authors admit that this community was formed by Christians from Pella, but, as we have just seen, that is nothing more than a remote possibility. Renan and Mgr Duchesne think that there was nothing in the city other than the camp of Legio X Fretensis.

The first communities were created outside of Judaea.

The early Churches were located in Damascus, in Antioch, on Crete, and in Libya. Paul’s Epistles are addressed to the Christians in Corinth, Galatia, and Rome. We know that there were Christians in Kechries, Ephesus, Kyrenia, Cyprus, etc. There were never any epistles sent to the “saints” in Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida, Nazareth, or even Jerusalem or Judaea.

The first propagandists were not the friends, companions, or disciples of a prophet named Jesus; they were called Paul of Tarsus, Ananias of Damascus, Apollos of Alexandria, Priscilla and Aquila of Rome, Barnabas of Cyprus, Stephen the first martyr, Philip the deacon...

It was in the Diaspora rather than Palestine that the Christian mission made headway. Ignatius knew the churches of Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, and Smyrna.

Finally, let us note that the seven Churches named in Revelation (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) are not those of Acts or the Epistles, and that Jerusalem is not mentioned.

It is not impossible that a religious sect was persecuted by the Jews in Jerusalem in the time of Pilate, but it must be admitted that this sect had already expanded throughout the East. In Jerusalem itself, there was a *de facto* split between the people who spoke Aramaic or “Chaldean” and the priestly class devoted to the Hebrew language. The Jewish element in Galilee, Perea, and the Decapolis was overwhelmed by the Gentiles; Samaria was almost entirely “Simonian”. And it should be emphasized that during the time of Saint Jerome (i.e. around the year 400), pagans were still worshipping Tammuz in the grotto at Bethlehem that was later turned into the birthplace of Jesus, who had previously been born in Nazareth.

It is not inconceivable that in Judaea, as elsewhere, people who practiced a “mystery religion” were somewhat mistreated, but we don’t know enough under this hypothesis to assert that there were already Christians by the year 30 of our era, if this date corresponds to the death of a Jewish messiah.

Geographical difficulties

If we move on from the story and examine geography, we see that the details given by the evangelists regarding Jerusalem and Palestine pose serious topographical problems. It is useful, for example, to remember that the site of Golgotha was not identified until the year 326, and that its discovery was made under conditions that carry the stench of deception. The main intent was to Christianize a cultic site that was formerly consecrated to Venus, and to proclaim that it was the site of Christ's tomb.

In the fourth century, an inexplicable event occurred. The Christians moved Zion (the City of David) from the lower section (east) to the upper city (west). Similarly, the Upper Room, before being placed at Zion, had long been located on the Mount of Olives. Later, the tomb of David was relocated at Bethlehem.

The first known pilgrim to have visited Jerusalem was the "Pilgrim of Bordeaux"; this was in 333 — i.e. three centuries after the events narrated by the evangelists, 263 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and 198 years after its reconstruction by Hadrian. The Empress Helena had traveled there in 326. However, this pilgrim did not go to Nazareth, Cana, Tiberias, or Emmaus. At Jerusalem, he saw the column of flagellation among the ruins of the Palace of Caiaphas from the time when Jesus suffered this torture in the Praetorium.

The discovery of the Holy Sepulchre was "recounted" by Eusebius; but this fourth-century Bishop does not mention the name of Golgotha.

These observations are troubling enough. Happily, Frs Vincent and Abel, in their invaluable work on Jerusalem, did not hesitate to write: "...the Church never made belief in a sanctuary — not even the most prominent and traditional, such as the Holy Sepulchre or Calvary — an obligation of orthodoxy for her children." Thus, and fortunately for history, the sites of evangelistic events are not matters of faith.

The case of Jerusalem is not unique. Nazareth, a name that appears neither in the Old Testament nor in Josephus, was identified beyond doubt in the time of Constantine, according to Epiphanius, as a uniquely Jewish urban area; the search for Nazareth's Byzantine remains is still ongoing.

The evangelists present us with a Palestine of convention, more symbolic than real. They describe a lake 11 km by 20 as the *sea* of Galilee; by contrast, they mention neither the Dead Sea nor the city of Tiberias. To have Jesus return from Tyre to the Lake of Gennesaret, which lies to the southeast, Mark (7.31) describes Jesus as passing through Sidon, which is 35 km north, and reaching the lake via the Decapolis. It gets even worse: such cities as Gerasa, Chorazin, Bethsaida, Magadan, Dalmanutha, Nain, Cana, and Enon near Salim are equally mysterious in a geography that is already quite fanciful.

We are not given more accurate information on the flora and fauna of Jesus' country. The evangelists mention the fig tree and the olive tree, which grow all around the Mediterranean; they take mustard to be a tree with branches, while cedars, date palms, and jujubes do not enter into their field of vision. The animals they know are the wolf, the viper, the crow, the fox, the colt, and the grasshopper (which are also found in Europe). They believe there was a herd of two thousand pigs in Gerasa, which would be impressive in a Gentile agricultural centre, but unthinkable in a country where swine were unclean animals in the highest degree. They believe that during the night of the Passion, the cock crowed three times in Jerusalem; unfortunately, the Talmud tells us that there were no cocks in Jerusalem; you find them in Rome.

In the Judaea of the evangelists, it never rains, and it is never cold. In Galilee, the peasants wear Greek clothing like Jesus and his disciples: the himation (Matt 9.20), the chiton (10.10), and the cloak (27.28–31). When he is at the table, Jesus lies on a bed like wealthy Greeks.

A possible role for Galilee

Are we truly in Judaea or Galilee? In any case, it would appear that in the early texts, Galilee played an important role that it was later deprived of. It is in Galilee that Jesus' birth, his youth, his first two miracles, the calling of his apostles, the call of the crowds, the Transfiguration, and his post-Resurrection appearance are situated. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Galilee became the religious centre of the Jews, the seat of their major schools and their most famous rabbis. Tiberias was their holy city; this was where the texts of the *Mishna* were assembled (around 110–120), to which the *Gemara* was later added.

In the time of Jesus, Galilee was prosperous, populous, and dotted with important cities and towns. The "sea" of Galilee (the Lake of Tiberias or Genneseret) was crossed by boats and ships. The followers of Moses (Jews, Syrians, and so on) were no doubt in the majority and practiced the religion in their own way, but they mingled with a very large number of Greeks, Egyptians, Arabs, and Syro-Phoenicians (Mark 7.26), whom Josephus calls Tyrians.

It is not surprising that in an earlier story, the Galilean preachers went first to neighbouring Samaria. Jesus had said that they needed to evangelize Samaria first; this is obviously a geographical necessity, and we know that Philip went to preach in Samaria where the Church was formed after the death of Stephen (in Acts). It is much more difficult to accept that Galilean Christianity leaped across Samaria in a single bound without leaving any trace and came to settle in Jerusalem; and that having failed in Judaea, it had enough strength left to conquer Samaria. The role of Jerusalem visibly disrupts a geographic reality that has no place

for it. An earlier story has been revised. Luke, in 4.44 (against the context and against Matthew and Mark), substitutes Judaea for Galilee.¹⁸

If we compare the four Gospels, it is apparent that in the three Synoptics, Jesus is raised in Galilee and spends very little time away from this province (between his baptism and John's arrest), and that he stays there for his entire ministry until departing for Jerusalem, where he dies. The fourth Gospel, rather, provides a new geographic setting for the existence of Jesus. Jesus spends one Passover in Jerusalem and travels around Judaea, goes back to Galilee, and returns to Jerusalem for another festival. Then he reappears (after a stay in Galilee) for the Feast of Tabernacles, and then for the Festival of Dedication, after which he goes to Perea and returns to Judaea. He then spends his final Passover in Jerusalem.

So it is only the Gospel of John that has multiplied the points of contact between Jesus and Jerusalem. In contrast, the three Synoptics assert that Jesus stayed continuously in Galilee.

Galilee accounts for almost the entire story of Jesus, if we do not include the Passion and the Resurrection, which consist of myths added to an early text and placed in Jerusalem. The city considered initially to be the site of Jesus' execution later becomes, in the imagination of the texts' editors, the birthplace of a Christianity associated with the Temple and strict observance of the Law. We will note that if it had really been so, there would have been no need to create a new religion.

In any case, we see that the Gospels are the combination of two stories: one that celebrated Galilee as Christ's theatre of operations, and another that placed his Passion in Jerusalem.

We do not, for that matter, accept Jesus' long stay in Galilee as historical fact. Already, at the time of the fourth Gospel, it was commonly thought that nothing good could come from that region (John 1.46), and certainly not the Messiah. It was, however, in Galilee that messianic fervour was at its greatest at the turn of the era. The Galileans were not orthodox in the views of the Palestinians, but the reverse was also true. The Galileans, though more strict in their religious practices, adorned their synagogues with representations of animals. The name of their country symbolized the "circle" of nations and foreigners. Is this symbol not a reflection of reality, a reference to the countries of the Gentiles?

Symbols and realities

Is it necessary, by the way, to adhere to the literal meaning of the references to Jerusalem in the Gospel?

¹⁸ This revision does not appear in all manuscripts. It was unknown to Marcion, at any rate.

It was a Jewish tradition to transpose geographic and historical names. That is why, in Isaiah, Damascus and Samaria are represented by the ancient names Rasin and Phaces — and that Syria is symbolized by the name Assur. In Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Nahum, the city of Alexandria is called Nō. Each knows that Rome is characterized as Babylon. Other examples can be found. That's why it isn't impossible for the name of Jerusalem in the Gospels to conceal that of another city or another region. Let's not be hypnotized any longer by words like "synagogue"; it is argued that since Paul often spoke to his followers in the synagogues, it was the Jews to whom he preached the good news. We must not forget that around the year 150, the Marcionites, who were "anti-Jewish" fanatics, referred to their meeting places as synagogues (see note on page 89).

On the other hand, the New Testament gives us two different forms of the name Jerusalem: Hierosolymes and Ierousalem. These two names alternate and sit side by side in our texts, which proves that for the two editors, who had different background, and who succeeded each other in the production of Christian writings (one of them at the very least), the city was more a symbol than a geographical reality.

It is equally understood that the Nebuchadnezzar mentioned in the book of Daniel was in reality Antiochus Epiphanes, a contemporary of the book's author; we are therefore justified in asking ourselves if the names of Pontius Pilate, Annas and Caiaphas are not allusions to much more recent persecutors of Christians, and if the events described to us through inconsistent stories actually took place in Jerusalem during the time of Pilate.

We are assured by the Catholic side that the Gnostics turned facts into symbols, events into signs, and historical figures into abstractions. This assurance is only an opinion, and it is quite possible for the opposite to be true. It is also easier to give an abstraction a human appearance (God, Truth, or Justice) than to turn the man Jesus into the Logos or the Word.

Heracleon, the first commentator on the New Testament, said that the story of the Samaritan woman was only an allegory about the drama of redemption — which many people accept without difficulty, since the scene has no historical character.

Heracleon also said that when Jesus goes down to Capernaum (John 2.12), that means — for such is the meaning of the city's name — that he is descending into the nether regions of the Cosmos. This meaning is retained in French, in which the word "capharnaüm" refers a place of chaos and debauchery, according to [French lexicographer] Littré; and the earliest reference to this city is in the New Testament. From there, Jesus returns to Jerusalem — in other words, from the physical realm to an intermediate region where the psychics live. There is nothing historical about this symbolic Jerusalem.

For their part, the Perates understood Egypt to symbolize the land of bondage, the physical realm, the perishable world. To leave Egypt was to detach oneself from the material

world and corruption, and to convert to asceticism in order to guarantee one's salvation (see note on page 89).

Verse 1.22 of Acts of the Apostles ("...until the day when he was taken up from us") was sometimes misunderstood by the Jewish Christians; in fact, the corresponding Aramaic and Syriac expression can have two different meanings: it can refer just as easily to going up to Jerusalem as to the ascension of the spirit to heaven! This explains how heavenly events can be transported to earth and get historicized.¹⁹ When we read Luke 9.51 and 19.38, we can easily see that what was taken to be Jesus' "going up" to Jerusalem could derive from a text in which it was the rising or ascension of Jesus — or rather, of his ethereal body, his spirit — to heaven.

This impression is confirmed when we read Revelation. John the Seer sees the New Jerusalem descend from heaven; its walls have twelve foundations (adorned with precious stones), which are its apostles. The Lord God and the Lamb are the temple of this city, into which only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life may enter.

Tertullian (*Cont. Marcion*, I.3) said that Ezekiel knew of this holy Jerusalem, which John had seen and the prophets had revealed before it was built.

The Montanists believed that the heavenly Jerusalem had manifested itself in Pepuza, Phrygia, and they visited this city to celebrate its mysteries. From around 155 to 165, men and women would go there to be initiated and to wait for a vision of Christ or a theophany. Montanus gave this region the name of Jerusalem.

It was believed, then, in the second half of the second century A.D. that the new Jerusalem would be established at Pepuza, which already went by that name. This illusion was bound to be accompanied by a number of other legendary details, and it might be in this "mystical" atmosphere and in Phrygia that the glorious entry of Jesus into Jerusalem amidst the cheers of the people took place. Mythology prevailed over history. The ideal Jerusalem was mistaken for a real Jerusalem located somewhere other than Palestine. It was the city of Christ; it was believed he had visited that city, that he would return to it, and that he manifested himself there to prophets and prophetesses at all times.

Now, Montanism exerted great influence on the evolution of Christianity in its infancy; the Gospels in the state we have them are contemporaries of this movement, perhaps even later in part. Consequently, there is no evidence that the Gospel stories about Jesus are a reflection of reality or an interesting legend from Palestine.

But if we are not dealing with a geographical reality, and if city names are sometimes symbolic, they are also a result of actual plays on words contrived by the copyists and

¹⁹ Dirk Plooiij, *The Ascension in the Western Textual Tradition*. (Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen) Afdeeling Letterkunde, Deel 67, series A, No. 2, 1929, 39–58.

interpolators of the Gospels. When these Jewish scribes wanted to complete the Greek text of the New Testament, they could not free themselves from their Hebrew culture, and they transposed it into Greek linguistic ingenuity.

If Jesus healed a mother-in-law of her fever, which is really a just a very minor miracle, it was because the same word in Hebrew means both fever and mother-in-law, as well as signifying the capital of Galilee. “Hamatha” means city of hot springs, fever, and mother-in-law. *Hamatha* is the Hebrew name for Tiberias. Thus, reading that Jesus had gone to Tiberias, the copyist has seen fit to provide further details that seem believable but are the natural product of his imagination when faced with a word that has three meanings.

It has also been observed that Luke, when recounting the miracle of the loaves, always uses (unlike the other Synoptics) the Greek word *episitismos* for food or provisions. Behind this word is the Hebrew word *saida*, and Luke is the only evangelist to include the name of the place where the story occurs: Beth-saida. When he discovered this, the learned Nestle recoiled in dread, but then returned to his desk and wrote, “The scales are falling from my eyes. Where did the miracle of the loaves take place? In Bethsaida, translated as ‘house of provisions’. Woe to you, Bethsaida!”²⁰

We find ourselves very far removed from the domain of history.

The impossibility of a Jewish Christianity in Jerusalem

We can go further than the refusal to accept a “Church” in Jerusalem as the origins of Christianity. If the information we have on it are to be believed, this Church would have consisted of an entirely Jewish community that frequented the Temple to practice particular rights, but which believed — above all — that Jesus had been the Messiah and that after his crucifixion, he had come back to life, risen to heaven, and become a god.

But the existence in Jerusalem of such a group of messianic Jews alongside the religious authorities who had rightly delivered Jesus to Pontius Pilate and dispersed his followers is unbelievable. What makes more sense is the explanation that will be provided later on the “conversion” of Constantine to such a Judeo-Christianity. To accept that a Roman emperor could have joined a religion he wanted to be universal but had as its god a Jewish rebel condemned to an ignominious death and executed by the Roman army, one must want to believe in the impossible at any cost. It is inconceivable that Constantine would have adopted

²⁰ These examples could be multiplied. See the article by H. Raschke: “Lieux et routes de Jésus d’après l’évangile selon Marc,” *Congrès d’Histoire du christianisme*, book I, p. 188, Rieder, Paris 1928, which provides on p. 193 authors and books that give complete information on the subject of allegorical place names.

the faith of a Jewish messianic cult; however, he could have accepted a crucified god — a solar deity — as he had tolerated an emasculated god and suffering gods (Attis and Zagreus); more likely, he sought to utilize the instrument of government that already represented the Christian Church established outside of Judaea in the land of the Gentiles, and to adapt it to the beliefs of the Roman world. The official Christianity at the time of Constantine must have been mostly of pagan origin, not Palestinian, and did not yet accept the “impudent lies and fables” that Eusebius saw had been inserted into the “memoirs of the apostles” and in the writings of Papias. The Pagans could not deify a man who died on a cross of torture, a Jew that the Jews themselves had never recognized as a Messiah.

Despite these arguments, let’s suppose for a moment that this Christian Jerusalem Church existed. How would it have been organized?

The first deacons were Hellenists

The titles of its agents were Greek: *presbyteros* (elder), *episcopos* (overseer), and *diaconos* (servant); it is only in a secondary (i.e. later) sense that they are translated as priest, bishop, and deacon. The earliest Christian institution, preceding the dubious institution of apostles, is that of the Hellenistic deacons; but that presupposes that the community behind it had a long past; it does not get us in touch with Christianity’s origins.

The first seven deacons all had Greek names: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas; and were very likely Christian Gnostics.²¹ Their chief was named Stephen; he was the first Christian martyr. Acts combines two stories of his death; in one, he would have been judged normally; in the other, he would have been the victim of the populace. In either case, this man, speaking Greek and filled with Gnostic ideas, addressed the Jews of Jerusalem to reproach them for opposing the Holy Spirit (who had not yet made its appearance in the first century), for not keeping the Law of the angels, and for killing the prophets. He was then stoned, but did not die without seeing the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God in heaven. This Stephen was neither an orthodox Jew nor a Christian; his death is oddly similar to that of James, and the text of Acts does not prove by itself that this event happened in Jerusalem.

At any rate, the creation and zone of activity of the first Hellenistic deacons was somewhere other than in Judaea; if they attempted their propaganda there, they must have

²¹ See “Les Apôtres et saint Pierre”, *Cahier Renan*, Nos. 15–16, and “La conversion de Simon le Magicien”, *Cahier Renan*, No. 9.

quickly judged the trial to be a success, and that it would be better to devote themselves entirely to the Gentile world.

The birthplace of Christianity was not in Judaea.

Other considerations concerning the very spirit of the Christian religion could be invoked to show that it could not have come from Judaism and that its Jewish aspects, contrary to what is commonly believed, are secondary additions.

Thus, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is incompatible with the unity of Yahweh. For a Jew, it would have been great blasphemy to assert contact between the spirit of God and a woman. Similarly, the Christian Last Supper in which Christ gives his blood to be drunk was absolutely contrary to Genesis (9.4) and to the Decree of Jerusalem (Acts 15.20 and 29), which forbade the ingestion of blood.

In addition, no Jew, least of all in Jerusalem, would have agreed to share a meal with the uncircumcised, whose presence alone rendered one unclean. That is why the Eucharist in its evangelistic form is not Jewish. The character who gives his flesh to be eaten and his blood to be drunk (even symbolically before his death) is not a man; he is a god who prepares his disciples for a future heavenly kingdom; the sacrament is a foreshadowing of the Banquet of the Elect who are close to God. Jesus is effectively telling them, “I want you to eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and I want you to sit on thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22.29-30).

When Mark (10.12) has Jesus say that a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery, it is not possible for this text to concern Judaea; Jewish law did not recognize divorce initiated by the wife. This oracle must have been given in a land like Rome, where a woman could divorce her husband.

When the four evangelists say that the body of Jesus was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, they do not realize that — for the Hebrews — it was a terrible outrage to place a dead body in someone else’s sepulchre, or in a tomb of another family, as this would break the unity of the tribe or of the family, a unity that could continue on even in Sheol.

Contrary to common opinion among Christians and Jews, we find that Christianity is not at all rooted in Judaism. The religion of Israel rejected Christianity and is still alive today without being altered by it, remaining completely separate.

If Christianity includes Jewish names and ideas, it is not a result of the influence of the Jews of Jerusalem, but thanks to the late contributions of the diaspora or somewhat heretical Jewish sects that had spread far beyond Palestine.

The two religions have different natures. The learned Dutchman Tiele has correctly classified religions into two categories:

- a) Theocratic religions in which the divine is separated from the human by an unbridgeable gulf; such as are found among the Semitic peoples.
- b) Theanthropic religions, which believe in a communication or relationship between heavenly beings and earthly creatures, thanks to a god-man or a man-god; such as are found among the Aryan peoples.

The second conception, which has gained dominance, could not have come from Jerusalem; it has no place in the religious mindset of the Jews.

Ultimately, the New Testament itself prevents us from believing in the existence of a Christian Mother-Church in Jerusalem.

On the other hand, it is obvious that any opinion one might have on the birthplace of Christianity relies in part on how one regards the historical existence of the Christ. This is the problem that we shall now examine.

II. Jesus Christ, a composite character

The question, “What do you put in its place?” is often addressed to the destructive critic of a belief, not with any philosophic perception of the fact that complete removal is effected only by putting a tested or tenable judgment in place of an untested or untenable, but with a sense of injury, as if a false belief were a personal possession, for the removal of which there must be “compensation.”

J. M. Robertson (*The Jesus Problem*, p. 3)

Facts do not penetrate into the world where our beliefs live; they do not give birth to these beliefs, and they do not destroy them; they can hurl constant refutations upon them without weakening them.

Marcel Proust (*In Search of Lost Time*)

Pléiade, book I, p. 148

No trace of a man who founded a new religion in Jerusalem can be found in history; this is all the more surprising given that some religious founders, such as Mani and Mohammed, left numerous historical traces of themselves in addition to their religious systems.

A more startling finding yet is that the New Testament, aside from some uncertain historical cross-references, does not provide the details that would allow us to understand the birth of Christianity and the stages of its evolution.

At the same time, hundreds of “Life of Christ” stories have been written; if you read a few, you’ve read them all, and we would agree with the Catholic critics that it is impossible to establish a true biography of Jesus.

One can only construct a biography by starting with a personal point of view. It is assumed that the human Christ was a Messiah, whether a prophet, a nationalist Jew, or a philosopher with some of the traits of Socrates... In each instance, things are “arranged” so that the character is consistent, rounding the corners when it cannot be avoided, forgetting inconvenient facts, adding suppositions, and placing everything into a historical context, so that the result is at least logical and plausible, if not true. Thus, one critic has said, “Jesus has become a receptacle each theologian fills with his own ideas.”

As H. Raschke wrote,²² *the historical existence of Jesus does not need to be denied because, truthfully, it has never been affirmed.* The historical Jesus has only existed for two hundred years; he is the product of Enlightenment philosophy (the end of the 18th century).

²² Cited by Drews, *Le mystère de Jésus*, Payot, Paris.

Critical Catholic positions

An important number of theologians and Christian critics — in other words, those who believe in the historical existence of the man Jesus — recognize the impossibilities they face in writing a life of Jesus.

That's why Bultmann wrote in his book entitled *Jesus* in 1926: "We can no longer know the character of Jesus, his life, and his personality... We have not a single one of his words whose authenticity we can demonstrate... In my estimation, whatever we can know about the life and character of Jesus, it's not very much."

And Bertram, in his *Nouveau Testament et Méthode historique* (1928): "The figure of Jesus is not directly accessible through history. It is futile to try to integrate him into historical developments... What is revealed to the believer is not the Jesus that was, but the Jesus that is; the historian must confine himself to this observation."

Similarly, Erik Sjöberg (*Der verborgene Menschensohn in den Evangelien*, 1955, p. 216) wrote: "But even if Jesus was truly a historical person and we are able to learn something about his historical character, the Jesus proclaimed by the Church and depicted in the Gospels is still a mythological figure. His name is all he has in common with the Jesus of history, who remains totally unknown to us. And the New Testament message is mythological in a more radical way than is implied in the present discussion regarding the demythologization of the Gospel."

We may equally cite Käsemann, who showed, in his *Analyse critique de l'Épître aux Philippiens*, that the hymn in 2.5–11 is not at all concerned with the *individual* who became a man, but with the *theological event* of salvation which puts the Saviour "in a suprahistorical, mythical framework".

In a recent article,²³ a clergyman acknowledged that it is commonly accepted that *writing a life of Jesus is no longer possible*, and he observes: *Paradoxically, we are in agreement in affirming that we know nothing about the life of Jesus. For the theologians, it is because he is God; for the professors of the Formgeschichte Schule, it is because he is an idea of the Christian community. The poor devil who writes a life of Jesus proves that he has not the slightest inferiority complex and that he will stop at nothing... he doesn't realize that Jesus has no life of his own... that Jesus is only a story...*

To critique this view, he cites a Catholic journal²⁴ that goes so far as to pose dangerous questions: *What can be and what must be our ideal? We reply: a history of Jesus...the strictly positive*

²³ Jean Steinmann, "Peut-on écrire la vie de Jésus?", *La Table Ronde*, No. 154, Oct. 1960. The author was not, however, afraid to write a "Life of Christ"; his book was blacklisted in 1962 because it showed the character of Jesus to be "confined by limitations that were too human".

²⁴ *L'ami du clergé*, August 11, 1960.

clarification of facts that are still quite recognizable — perhaps a few sequences of events, some causal relationships if possible.

All we wish to show from this debate is that Christian criticism is itself quite embarrassed by the biography of a historical Jesus.²⁵

Three rationalistic approaches

The diversity of the approaches taken by rationalist criticism clearly shows that it is faced with problems that are insoluble or poorly stated due to the lack of a solid basis. Independent critique on the subject of Jesus' historical existence can be divided into three trends.

The first is that the man Jesus did not exist; Christianity was born without him. If we abandon the man and keep the god, nothing or very little about the Christian religion would be different; it would observe the same rituals, the same sacraments, and the same prayers, barely modified and with nearly the same doctrine. There would be no more man who was crucified and brought back to life (a miracle that many educated Christians admit is only symbolic); instead, we would rediscover a god who died and was reborn — a normal act for a god, particularly at the turn of the era — a god who can bring salvation to the faithful better than a man mocked and beaten can. That is why Paul-Louis Couchoud says that *Jesus is a god made into a man*, and why Prosper Alfaric assures us that *Jesus is a myth*.

For the learned members of the second rationalist trend, particularly Loisy and Guignebert, Jesus did exist, but we possess no reliable information about him, even if such information appears to be historical in nature. Jesus has entirely receded into myth to the point where we can no longer glimpse his identity. Everything is as it would be had Jesus never existed.²⁶

The third rationalist trend poses the working hypothesis that Jesus did exist, but with the unhappy restriction that he was not at all the man depicted in the Gospels. He would have been a Jewish fanatic, one of the Sicarii who rebelled against the high priest and the majority of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as well as the Roman procurator and his legionnaires. This man did not found Christianity, and its dogma did not come from him. Robert Eisler has pushed this hypothesis quite far. Turmel has presented a slight variation of it.

²⁵ The problem of Jesus was clearly exposed in a recent book: *La Passion de Jésus*, by Marc Stephane, Dervy, Paris, 1959.

²⁶ Regarding Loisy's Christ, the Reverend Father Grandmaison says: *It's like being in front of one of these evanescent paintings that the walls of some catacombs perpetuate more than they preserve... (The Saviour) becomes a bland character, chimeric, anemic... (Jésus-Christ, II, p. 198–199).*

Fundamentally, these three rationalist trends are not as contradictory as they appear. The only thing that separates them is how they explain the facts. There isn't such a big difference, from the standpoint of origins, between a founder who didn't exist, a founder so obscured by legend that he cannot be recovered, and a rebel leader who never sought the spiritual salvation of future Gentile Christians.

History is not of much help to us in deciding between these three positions; it provides us only with the argument from silence which, on its own, is not decisive. On the other hand, despite our reservations about their historical value, it might be the books of the New Testament that, at least indirectly, will tell us in which era the Christians, their scriptures, Jesus the god and Jesus the man appeared.

Jewish sources are unaware of Jesus Christ.

Let us first return to the texts that are considered to be historical.

Jewish sources do not tell us about the Christ; we do not find any Talmudic writings about Jesus; the few passages that concern him are directed against Christian tradition, and this discussion cannot be considered a witness to the existence of the Gospel Jesus.

The only point of interest in the arguments of the ancient rabbis against Christian tradition is that they do not deny it; they interpret it in order to debunk it and to undermine the foundations of the new faith, but what they are opposed to is not an earlier Jewish tradition; they have no documentation other than what Christian tradition provides.

Nevertheless, we must take note of a certain Jesus ben Pandera who was equated with Jesus ben Stada in the Talmud. The former was stoned, and his body was put on display in Jerusalem on the eve of Passover under Alexander Jannaeus (106-79 BC). The latter lived in the time of Rabbi Akiba, about the year 130 of our era;²⁷ he too was stoned and hung on the eve of Passover in Lydia (Asia Minor), far from Palestine. Whether these were two different versions of the same person or two separate people, the Talmud does show traces of a Jesus who resembled that of the Gospels but lived a century earlier. Making things worse is the fact that according to the Talmud, there was another contemporary of Jesus named Yehoshua ben Paraya who lived in the time of Alexandre Jannaeus, i.e. the time of Jesus Pandera, and this Jesus founded an apostate Jewish sect. This is why Salomon Reinach remarks with surprise that *there*

²⁷ J. M. Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology*, p. 263, and *The Jesus Problem*, p. 112.

were disciples of Jesus nearly a century before the Christian era;²⁸ and one British author wonders if Jesus might have lived one hundred years BC.²⁹

In any case, it seems that, like the Christians, the Jews showed considerable confusion regarding names and dates when they put into writing the more-or-less altered memories of their masters or ancestors regarding either a single Jesus or several men of that name.

A learned Israeli³⁰ who believes in the historicity of Jesus wrote the following words: ... *the appearance of Jesus during a time of confusion that afflicted Judea under the Herods and the Roman procurators was so unremarkable that his contemporaries and his first disciples barely noticed it; and once Christianity had become a powerful and influential sect, Israel's teachers were already too far removed from the time of Jesus to accurately recall the events of the life of the Christian Messiah; they contented themselves with popular stories about the Messiah that were current and with the facts of his existence...* However, it is these same legends and Gospels that the author felt could support a 600-page book dedicated to the life of Jesus the Nazarene. As Salomon Reinach wrote, *we cannot create true history from myths any more than we can make bread from flower pollen.*

In the Greek text of *Jewish Antiquities* by Flavius Josephus, we find two mentions of Jesus (in XVIII.3.3 and in XX.9.1). These two passages are interpolations.³¹ Furthermore, Flavius Josephus mentions neither the Christian movement, nor messianism, which he certainly knew about, in any of his works. Some have tried to explain the silence of Josephus by saying that he wanted to remain in the Romans' good graces and would have omitted any incidents that

²⁸ S. Reinach, *Orpheus*, p. 334, § 31, Paris, 1933.

²⁹ *Did Jesus Live 100 B.C.?* London, 1903. Though anonymous, this book's author was G. R. S. Mead. See also *Dict. of Christ and Gospels*, II, p. 877–822, the article by Travers Herford. The interpretation of the Talmudic passages concerning Jesus has prompted Fr Lagrange to write that *in the Jewish texts, the life of Jesus is sometimes brought back to the time of Alexander Jannaeus, sometimes to the time of R. Aquiba, or even further back with leeway of more than two hundred years (Le messianisme chez les Juifs, 1909, p. 289).* Another author observes: *Already in ancient times, crude fables on account of Jesus were circulating among the Jews, in which it seems that numerous individuals from different periods have been confused and amalgamated... the story of Jesus in the Talmud is so muddled that the rabbis of the Middle Ages were able, with the best intentions in the world, to insist that the Jesus of the Talmud was not the Christian Jesus.* (Isidore Loeb, “La controverse religieuse entre les Chrétiens et les Juifs au moyen-âge”, in *Rev. Hist. des Relig.*, XVII, 1888, p. 317).

³⁰ Joseph Klausner, *Jésus le Nazaréen*, Payot, Paris, 1933. Underlined by us.

³¹ None of the three extant manuscripts of Flavius Josephus go back earlier than the 11th century. Origen (*Contra Celsum* I.47) reveals to us that Josephus did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, but Eusebius, around 320, found affirmation to the contrary in his text of Josephus, which had been “improved” in the intervening period.

might have dredged up unpleasant memories. One could also put forth the hypothesis that Christians erased all remarks and information that might have portrayed Christianity in a way other than how they wanted it portrayed. That is not impossible, but these explanations are nothing more than suppositions that cannot compensate for the silence of the texts. The essential fact is that Josephus is silent on Christ and on the Christians; and he lived between the years 37 and 100, i.e. after the presumed career of Jesus, during the time when Christianity would have been spreading.

Other Jewish writers who were very knowledgeable and famous in their day remained equally silent on the origins of Christianity; Philo the Jew, who was born 30 years before our era and died in the year 50, wrote a *History of the Jews* that ought to have mentioned Jesus, Christ, or the Christians. Similarly, Justus of Tiberius, who wrote a *Jewish History* up to the year 50, should have mentioned events that took place around the years 29–30. It is very surprising that these two historians made no mention of Christians, of Christ, or of Jesus; not even any indirect allusions to events in which they would have been involved. However, our surprise — legitimate if a historical Christ existed — disappears if Jesus was originally a sectarian god.

Pagan sources are late in mentioning Christians.

The pagan writers of the first century know nothing of the crucifixion of Jesus or Christians either. Seneca (2 BC to 66), Pliny the Elder (23–79), Martial (40–63), Plutarch (45–125), Juvenal (55–140), Persius (34–62), Pausanias (around 185), and Apuleius (around 170) maintain a stunning silence regarding Christ and his followers. Epictetus (50 to 120?) does make an allusion to Galileans, but it shows no interest in Christianity; it refers to those who, following in the footsteps of Judas the Galilean (in 6–7), continued to revolt against the Romans and gave birth to the Zealot party. Lucan, Pliny the Elder, and Seneca also speak harshly of the Jews, but they are silent about the Christians.

Some would like, without valid reason, to connect a message sent by the Emperor Claudius to the prefect of Egypt in 41 with the Christians: “I explicitly order the Jews not to bring in or admit Jews who come down the river from Egypt or from Syria, a proceeding which will compel me to conceive serious suspicions. Otherwise, I will by all means take vengeance on them as fomenters of a common plague that is infecting the whole world.” That order concerns not Christians but messianic or apocalypticist Jews who were preaching the end of the world and the coming of their Messiah. What Claudius feared most of all regarding the Alexandrian Jews was not their messianism, which applied to few of the hellenized Jews in Egypt, but their number and the anti-Semitism that could result. He was afraid that their unfortunate discord, which he had already witnessed, would be rekindled and cause trouble.

The first Latin text concerning Christianity, if not spurious, dates to 111.³² It is the letter sent by Pliny the Younger as governor of Bithynia to the emperor Trajan asking what actions he should take against Christians who were gathering before dawn to sing hymns to Christ as to a god. The phrase “Christo quasi deo” proves that the Christ was considered to be nearly a god; he was the son of a god, a kind of angel.

The authenticity of this account by Pliny has often been contested since the 16th century.³³ Whatever the case may be, this account can be taken as evidence of only one thing, that in the early second century, Pliny the Younger knew Christians who worshipped a Christ. He does not speak of a man named Jesus.

Around the year 120, Suetonius, in his *Life of Nero*, mentions the persecution of the Christians without giving the name of the sect’s founder, but in his *Life of Claudius*, he happens to mention the expulsion of the Jews from Rome who were engaged in an insurrection under the instigation of Chrestos. Again, this is about the Jews, but who was this Chrestos? Was he an unknown Jewish agitator or the Christ? If he was the Christ, we must note that Suetonius places this event under the reign of Claudius, i.e. between 41 and 54. In that case, this Christ could not be the one that had been crucified in Jerusalem around 29–30. He would correspond rather to Paul.³⁴ It is problematic that Suetonius does not mention Christians in that passage, and we have reason to doubt the expulsion. In fact, Cassius Dio (writing a century after Suetonius) tells us that “the Jews were so numerous in Rome that they could not be driven out

³² We are still unsure if Pliny was the provincial governor.

³³ Notably by Havet (*Le christianisme et ses origines*, book IV, p. 428–431). He notes that *the only manuscript on which basis the correspondence of Pliny and Trajan was published disappeared immediately after its publication, so that we have no physical proof that these two letters were actually in the manuscript, and that they were not composed by a Latinist at the end of the 15th century...* Also worth noting is the absolute silence of Pliny on the Christians elsewhere in this letter; he mentions them neither in his private letters, nor in his correspondence with the emperor, nor in his *Panegyricus*. Arthur Drews (*Le mythe de Jésus*, p. 100) says that the letter of Pliny is modeled on the discourse by Festus to King Agrippa (Acts 25.14ff), that it was fabricated in the early 16th century by Gibcondo di Verona, and lastly, that Pliny was never governor of Bithynia.

³⁴ Josephus is unaware of the incident reported by Suetonius and speaks about Claudius in positive terms. By contrast, the Acts (24.25) refer to an accusation against Paul at Caesarea: *This man is a plague. He incites riots among all the Jews around the world...* Another curious fact: Paul had a companion by the name of Jesus called Just (Col. 4.11); the nickname “Just” is the same one given to James, brother of Jesus.

It has also been thought that the mention of the Christians in Suetonius (*Nero* 16) that puts them between herbs and chariot drivers is an awkward addition. Moreover, the Acts of the Apostles (28.21–23) establishes that there were no Christians in Rome around the year 62.

without causing a ruckus; Claudius did not expel them, but he would not allow them to meet” (Liv. 55).

Let us now examine the supposed account of Tacitus that dates to the years 116–117. In his *Annals* (XV.44), he recounts that Nero accused the Christians of having set fire to Rome, and that the name “Christian” came from Christ who had, under Tiberius, been handed over to the procurator Pontius Pilate for punishment. He adds that this loathsome superstition, repressed at the time, had risen again not only in Judaea, but also in Rome.

Let us analyze this evidence. Tacitus does not name Jesus; he speaks only of the Christ, and he takes this cultic title to be a proper name. Would these happen to be sectarians whose repressed movement had suddenly just been reborn? Was it really the same “religion” that had drawn the attention of the Roman authorities in Palestine around the year 30? Tacitus was writing three generations after the events that he recounts. He is simply reporting hearsay. He is not a direct witness, and it is surprising that he knows more about the Christians than the Jewish and Roman historians who preceded him and knew nothing about the crucifixion in the year 30. He is confusing the messianists that existed under Nero with the new Christian sect in the time of Trajan.³⁵

Tacitus associates Christians with the fire that ravaged Rome in year 64 of the common era. If that had been the case and the Christians were martyred by Nero because of this disaster, the Church Fathers would not have failed to mention it and write long chapters on the persecution instituted by Nero. However, early Christian tradition is silent with regard to Neronian persecution and the account by Tacitus. The Epistles of Paul make no reference to it. Nor does the first Epistle of Peter; nor does Revelation know about the collective martyrdom of Christians accused of setting fire to Rome. Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and even Melito (bishop of Sardis around 170 who provides the earliest Christian reference to the cruelty of Nero: *For this had never happened before, that the pious race should now suffer persecution...*) — none of these clergymen was aware of this persecution of the Christians in 64. Tertullian, who frequently

³⁵ Fr Battifol writes on the subject in *L’Eglise naissante et le catholicisme*: *We cannot accept with rigour the terms of Tacitus’ statement... He presents things as if, from the death of Christ to the fire of Rome in 64, Christianity had gone through a prolonged phase of suppression, and then, shortly before 64, it had undergone a phase of sudden expansion, not only in Judaea, but also in Rome.* Bruno Bauer (*Christ and the Caesars*) estimates that *He (Tacitus) must have obtained the fact of the conviction of the founder of Christianity in the same official archives in which Tertullian discovered a note stating that at the moment of Jesus’ death, the sun was darkened at midday.* We would add that the phrase in *Annals* 15.44 is an isolated witness; it is the only passage in which Pilate is mentioned by a Roman writer. However, a recent discovery establishes that Pontius Pilate was Prefect and not Procurator or Governor. This error in the Gospels is then repeated in Tacitus; it is in the Gospels that the interpolator of Tacitus went looking for this detail.

relied on Tacitus, did not read this passage in the works that had before him. Two centuries after the alleged event, Lactantius, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome suggest that Peter and Paul were victims of Nero's fury (which is far from being an established fact), but they have no idea regarding the accusation made against the Christians, that they had set fire to Rome; nor to the multitude of the faithful who were thrown to the flames.

Around 400, Sulpicius Severus repeated the comments of Tacitus on the Christians and on the fire of Rome, but later writers are unaware of it, including these particular remarks. Nor do Nero and his crimes qualify for Dante's *Inferno*. This silence of more than a thousand years on the Christians in 64 is very serious when it comes to the authenticity of the 15th book of Tacitus' *Annals* and Sulpicius Severus' *Chronicle*. The possibility of a forger of the 14th or 15th century inserting these passages into earlier manuscripts he was copying cannot be excluded,³⁶ especially since Tacitus says nothing of the Christians anywhere other than in this dubious passage.

We can conclude, then, that the Romans did not hear about Jesus for at least a century and must concur with Daniel-Rops when he writes: "It is not rigorously provable from Roman documents alone that Jesus existed..."

The appearance of the Christians

The term "Christian" certainly did not exist in 64; it was coined much later in the Gentile world to designate Gentile Christians; its first widespread use is by the Apologists (Justin, Athenagorus, Theophilus, and Minucius Felix), Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, etc. — in other words, around just 145 at the earliest — but from that point onwards, it was applied with ease to sectarian Jews of the first century, making it possible for the new religion to back-date its origins.³⁷

Yet, the name "Christian" does not necessarily possess the etymology that is attributed to it. We are assured that it comes from "christ", which in Greek is the equivalent of the Hebrew

³⁶ The authentic chronicle of Sulpicius Severus was discovered by Florez in the middle of the 18th century in a manuscript from the 13th; we do not find the story of the persecution of the Christians under Nero there.

³⁷ Recall that the god Serapis was surnamed Chrestus, and that his followers could just as easily be confused with our Christians. The same name was applied to the subterranean mystery gods of Samothrace as well as to Hermes, Osiris, and Isis. The emperor Hadrian wrote after 130 that — in Egypt — "the worshippers of Serapis are also Christians and those who call themselves the bishops of Christ are devoted to Serapis." Is this text about Christus and not Chrestus?

word “messiah”, which means “anointed”, to which some would add (though not strictly required) that it refers to a man named Jesus. It can also be shown — without involving Jesus — that the first Christians and some Gnostics were anointed with the oil³⁸ of the Holy Spirit or the Tree of Life during baptism; thus, Cyril of Jerusalem states that the term “Christs” comes from the anointing. This is confirmed by Methodius (*Symposium, or on Virginity*, VIII.8) who cites Psalm 104.15 (105.15). In the eyes of the pagans, they were “christs”, an ironic or derogatory term that amounted to calling them “oily ones” or “smeared ones”, and not followers of a Jewish messiah unknown in the Greek world. Moreover, the word “Chrestians”, which became prevalent and preceded the term “Christians”, has nothing to do with “Christ”; it means “good” or “friendly”.³⁹

Therefore, we can say for certain that Christians as such were unknown in pagan literature before 112 — a highly doubtful date — and in Christian literature before 145, a century after the supposed life of the man Jesus in Palestine.⁴⁰ This fact is corroborated by anti-Christian arguments, which do not start until around 160. That is when pagan philosophy begins its counterattack against Christian propaganda. It is the time of Justin’s involvement with the Cynic philosopher Crescens. Justin equally accuses “the princes of the priests and doctors” of the Jewish people for “profaning and blaspheming the son of God throughout the earth” (*Dial. Tryph.* CXVII.3). Around 170, Celsus describes Christian missionaries as charlatans, and their doctrines as absurd. He lists a large number of Christian sects, all Gnostic, as well as their rivalries and disputes. He knows not of a single Christianity, but rather of a multitude of Christian groups who do not profess the same faith. The name “Christian” is

³⁸ II Cor. 1.21; I John 2.20, 2.27; Tertullian (*De Bapt.* 7, *De Res. Carn.* 8)

³⁹ Chrestus was a name used in Rome in the third century. Ulpian, Praetorian prefect in 222, had two assistants, one of which was named Chrestus; and Justin (*Apol.* 1.4) wrote: *Considering only the name that accuses us, we are the best of men*. For the Marcionites, Jesus was the good god (*Adamantios* 2.9). The “Christians” of Pliny and Trajan might have been “Paulinians” who spoke of their good god, his heavenly crucifixion, and the end of the world.

Incidentally, Chrestus is also the simple name used in Codex Mediceus, the only manuscript of Tacitus. It was later corrected by a scribe who scratched out the *e* and put an *i* in its place.

⁴⁰ The term “Christian” occurs only three times in the New Testament (in Acts and I Peter), and not in the Gospels; it is absent from the Epistles of Paul; nor can be found in the writings of Polycarp or Tatian. Harnack (*Missions*, I, p. 97, n. 3) cited by Goguel (*La Naiss. du Chr.*, p. 211, n. 4) provides an original text which speaks of *Christians and Jews who confess Christ*; thus, these Jewish “Christ-ians” were not Christians, being that a distinction is made.

applied to diverse sects. Already, in 130, Hadrian indicated that the Christians of Alexandria were devoted to Serapis.⁴¹

During this time, the only knowledge that pagans had so far of the name Jesus came from Gnostic sects that adopted as their god around the year 115. Jesus the man was completely unknown.

The silence or gullibility of historians

Are we to think that the Jewish historians, like the pagan writers, were redacted by Imperial censorship, by the rabbis, and by the Church Fathers in all things concerning the Messiah Jesus? No doubt, the books of the Bible were destroyed and remade on many occasions; the Jewish and Christian orthodoxies got rid of many apocryphal, apocalyptic, and Gnostic books, as well as the polemical works of their adversaries. But is it likely that everything was destroyed and that only the messiah Jesus was targeted? We can find traces of other messiahs; and, even in the New Testament, elements portending a Jesus other than the traditional one are present.

Furthermore, even if it were possible to hide or correct manuscripts, such treatment would be difficult, even impossible, with respect to inscriptions, paintings, and monuments. Now, Christians only had separate cemeteries in Rome around the end of the second century or the beginning of the third, and in the Catacombs, the human or crucified Jesus is nowhere to be found; what we *do* find — along with Orpheus and the Good Shepherd — is the heavenly Christ, with his pagan beardless face and a halo with the solar cross of victory; we also find depictions of the sacred meal with bread and fish, and it is the Seven rather than the Twelve who are getting ready to partake. One is reminded that the Marcionites ate fish instead of meat. Lastly, the oldest Christian inscription that we possess is from a Marcionite church at Lebaba (near Damascus); it dates to 318–319; in this inscription, it is “Chrestos” (the Good) who is named, not “Christus” (the anointed), and with no mention of Jesus.

The obvious dearth of historical evidence is certainly deplorable, but admittedly, we are only able to reason on the basis of facts that we know to be certain or probable.

With no secular author attesting to the historicity of Jesus, some would like to argue that none contested it either. This argument holds little weight, because we still have evidence of a

⁴¹ See note 37. This is supplemented by the following observation: Sulpicius Severus, who calls Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius persecutors of the Christians, wrote that under Antoninus (138–161) there had been peace for the Churches. However, Antoninus had suppressed an uprising of Jews in 155. A distinction is therefore being made between Jews and Christians. On this subject, see also the *Bulletin du Cercle Ernest-Renan*, No. 97, February 1963.

pre-Christian Gnosticism and fragments of Gnostic books that taught a Christ who was spiritual and not yet humanized.

We only know the writings of Celsus and Porphyry by way of rebuttals made against them, but we know that Celsus had this to say about Christians: *you create fables yet you do not know how to make them plausible... some of you have reworked the Gospels at least three or four times so that you can deny what it is we object to*. We also know that Trypho said to Justin: *you follow a futile rumour and your christ is of your own making. No one even knows when he was born or where he lived*. Porphyry claimed that *the evangelists were inventors and not historians of the things they declared about Jesus*.

Therefore, the pagans certainly doubted the existence of Jesus, and they were not the only skeptics. We know thanks to Saint Jerome that *even in the time of the apostles, while the blood of Christ in Judea was not yet dry, it was claimed that the body of the Saviour was only a phantom* (Adv. Lucif. 23), which is confirmed by numerous passages in the New Testament (notably 1 John 4.2 and 2 John 7) that argue against the adversaries of a human christ: *Every spirit that does not confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God*.

In any case, even if it is true that the silence of history and the doubts of contemporaries do not prove on their own that Jesus did not exist as a human, they cannot be invoked *a fortiori* to certify that existence. With such logic, one might seriously conclude that life forms did exist on the moon and Mars simply because it is possible for life to exist there.

To demand proof from those who do not accept the historical existence of Jesus is nonsense. Negative proof cannot exist. It is up to believers to establish the validity of their “historical” view. However, the evidence to support their claims is lacking.

Opinions do not count as evidence, even in general. Even if all the contemporaries of a man-god named Jesus had believed in his existence, the reality of that existence would still be questionable, just like that of Hercules, centaurs, and even the ghosts that many believe haunt Scottish castles. At the turn of our era, people were only interested in historical reality insofar as they could adapt it to beliefs and superstitions — a view, in other words, that treats history as an ideal truth having nothing to do with actual events.

The appearance of Jesus the god

When and how did the name of Jesus appear? (See note on page 89.)

Aside from the Gospels, which are much later than some assume, it appears that Jesus was introduced to Gnosticism by Saturninus around the years 115–120. For him, Jesus was incorporeal and unbegotten; it would be a mistake to believe he was then considered to be

human. In the eyes of the Gnostics, this Jesus was a divine being; he took the place of the Mother of All Living; the primitive, feminine lineage of the first Gnostics disappeared before Jesus the god.

For the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Jesus is an archangel; if we look at the *Didache*, it knows of no historical Jesus.

Revelation, the Jewish portions of which were written around 69 and then Christianized much later (undoubtedly after 135), knows equally of a divine Jesus, but it paints numerous portraits of him that are difficult to reconcile: a heavenly Messiah, a Lamb slain at the end of the world, a heavenly High Priest, the Child of the Bride of the Lamb and of Yahweh who escapes the Dragon and ascends into the sky. There, Jesus is not yet a man.⁴² Far from succumbing to his enemies, this Messiah establishes a Jewish Kingdom on the ruins of the Roman empire; this is not our Jesus.⁴³

In the original text of the Epistles of Paul, the name of Jesus appears secondary; it was added to Christ who, for the apostle, was a god of mystery, a redeemer, an enemy of the Jewish Law who was crucified in the cosmos by the prince of the world (Yahweh), and by the planetary demons who guard imprisoned souls.⁴⁴

Similarly, in the Epistle to the Hebrews (around 145), Jesus the heavenly High Priest, Priest of the Most High God, was able “take on the likeness” of men, but his body and blood came from the sky. He was superior to the angels; he was not yet human.

For the *Gospel of Peter*, the Christ was a giant higher than the sky; he was identified with a heavenly cross and felt no pain.

⁴² The seer of Revelation tells us (20.2) that an angel descended from heaven and subdued the Dragon for a thousand years.

⁴³ V. Cahier Renan, No. 12: “Le mythe samaritain d’Hélène”. It was against this female lineage that the *Clementine Writings* rebelled. Some Gnostic sets that preceded Christianity (the Naassenes) or the Gospels (the Nicolaitans) worshipped the feminine Holy Spirit, who was the Mother of God and All Living. Proceeding directly in line from the Great Mother of Asia and the Mediterranean, she was interpreted mystically in the Church as the bride of Christ. The Virgin Mary, a replica of the Fertility Goddess, was not a historical individual. The Madonna already existed many centuries before Christianity, and the statuettes of Isis manifest the image of the Virgin and Child. Thus, it was no difficulty for Mary to lend her name to her older appearance as the goddess of springs and trees, and to build churches on the sites of pagan temples. Justin complained (I *Apol.* 64) about seeing pagans erect the statue of the pagan virgin they called Coré near springs.

⁴⁴ Some portions of the Epistles and Revelation are composed entirely in the form of poetic stanzas; their text is liturgical, not historical.

According to the *Ascension of Isaiah* (XI.7.14), Jesus comes out of the womb of Mary without anyone noticing. The *Infancy Gospel of James* (17.20) tells us that the Virgin gave birth without showing any traces of childbirth whatsoever, which means that the Virgin herself was not human in nature. The *Acts of John* show us a Jesus who can change his appearance at will, needing neither food nor sleep and leaving no footprints on the ground.

In the late second century or early third, Clement of Alexandria (*Pedagog.* I.2.91; *Fragm.* III.3.210) believed that when John touched the body of the Christ, he thrust his hand through without meeting any resistance from the flesh. Origen (*Contr. Cels.* 2.64, 3.41) claimed to know that the body of Jesus was ethereal and divine. After 365, Hilary of Poitiers recalled that the body of the Christ did not submit to natural law, as when he walked on the water and passed through closed doors. His flesh was unique for it had been conceived by the Holy Spirit (*De Trinitate* 10.23) [see note on page 90].

Marcion (around 140) in his *Evangelion* has Jesus descend from the sky as the son of God *in the form of an adult man*, but he is not a man; he possesses an ethereal, incorruptible body. He is a saviour spirit, a phantom. For Justin as well, around 150, Jesus the god is made from ether and takes human form. It is perfectly natural that, subsequently, the disciples and the people would no longer have understood these theological subtleties and would have come to regard Jesus as a man.⁴⁵

It does seem that responsibility for this failure of comprehension goes back to Marcion, who was the first to have conceived of the earthly epiphany of Jesus. In him, we glimpse the “turning point” of the metamorphosis from a god to a historical individual. His disciples did indeed assume that the period of time separating Marcion from this epiphany was a hundred years. The famous expression “in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius” — i.e. the year 28–29 — suggests that one hundred years was derived from the year 128–129, which would then be highlighted as that of the revelation to Marcion of the coming of a divine being to earth. The date of the arrival of a god who was not historical could not have been furnished by Marcion, but his disciples calculated it when they needed to fix the date of the manifestation of a prophet in whom God was incarnate.⁴⁶ Finally, the date was seized upon by the disciples of John the Baptist as that of the manifestation of their master, and it serves that purpose in Saint Luke’s Gospel.

⁴⁵ Jesus is the name of the divine Christ transformed into a man (Justin: *Apol.* II). Similarly, Krishna is the name of the reincarnated Vishnu. The Ascension of Jesus and the Assumption of the Virgin are simply the consequence of their divine nature; they had to be sent back to heaven from which they had descended.

⁴⁶ See Couchoud, *Jésus le dieu fait homme*, p. 162 and n. 2.

God humanized and man deified

This God in human form was soon to become a man of divine appearance, but when this gradual transformation occurred, it was necessary to explain it.

It was first thought that a divine element (Spirit, Word, or Angel) — in other words, an emanation from God — covered the Virgin with its shadow, and that nine months later, the child Jesus was born, appearing in the same form as all other men. Not all Christians thought highly of this miraculous “conception” and supposed that the father of Jesus was Joseph, but that at a certain point the divine spirit had entered into the body of the child. Others imagined that the spirit only descended upon Jesus at the moment of his baptism at the age of about thirty.

Where could this “spiritual” sonship of Jesus come from? Certainly not from countries that speak Hebrew or Aramaic, because in these languages, the word “Spirit” (*Ruach*, *Ruchâ*) was feminine, and such a spirit could not by nature impregnate Mary. That is why, according to the Gospel of the Hebrews, Jesus says that “his mother the Holy Spirit” had taken him by the hair and transported him to Mount Tabor. In the latter case, Jesus was thus depicted as coming from a female lineage, his mother belonging to the race of giants.

The idea of the spiritual sonship of Jesus is also incompatible with Jewish theology, which does not accept God being the generative principle of a single man. However, it was natural for Justin to compare the birth of Jesus to that of demigods and heroes who were born from a god and a mortal woman.

In any case, the birth of Jesus was imagined in diverse ways, which proves that no one actually knew anything about it. But this was insufficient grounds to prevent it from being spoken of, though this did not happen immediately as might be supposed, not before the end of the 2nd century (see note on page 90).

The hesitation of the scribes

Around 177 at the earliest — if the *Diatessaron* was by him — Tatian harmonized the Gospels, but he did not read in Luke the first two chapters concerning the birth of the Christ. According to O. Cullman (*Christol. du N.T.*, p. 111), *there were already, in some rabbinic circles, genealogies that were ready for the awaited Messiah*. “Ready” means that they had been prepared on the basis of the expected event. Assuming they existed, what importance should we give them?

Jesus appeared already as an adult in the Gospel of Mark, which knows nothing of his childhood. Next, Matthew and Luke each invent a genealogy; unfortunately, these two

genealogies are incompatible with each other, and they are both equally imaginary. Celsus ignored these two genealogies, which dated back to Abraham and Adam, but he knew one through Mary that has not reached us, and he treated it as an arrogant fantasy. Justin knew a genealogy different from those of Luke and Matthew. Epiphanius reports (30.13f) that the first Christians possessed no record of the birth of Jesus.⁴⁷

Julius Africanus asserts that Herod ordered the destruction of the genealogies stored in the temple in order to prevent comparisons with his own; on the other hand, one might think that memories of the family of David were very vague at the turn of our era, as the Temple archives had not preserved the genealogy of Jesus and no one cared to link this genealogy with a family of Galilean peasants. Finally, if members of the family of David had really existed, they would not have failed to contest one or both of these genealogies. It is said that when Domitian summoned the parents of the “Lord” (see p. 17), they replied that the reign of the Christ was not of this earthly world, but was heavenly and angelic, and would come at the end of time. It is understood that the emperor was thus reassured, but one wonders what kind of human corporeality the actual parents of the Jewish messiah could have had.

The Ebionites, descendants of the first Jewish Christians, rejected all genealogies. In II Timothy 2.8, Jesus is of the race of David *according to my Gospel*, which means he was not according to others. The Epistle to the Hebrews 7.14 states that it is evident that “our Lord came from Judah”, which is not the same as being a son of David. And if the Epistle to the Romans appears to accept his Davidic sonship (1.3), it is because the expression “born of the sperm of David” is an interpolation.

The Christian “novel” becomes history.

Imagination made up for ignorance, and after being son of God and then son of the Holy Spirit, Jesus became son of Joseph and, in any event, Messiah and Son of David. When these innovations were incorporated into the Gospels, they had to be explained to Greek-speaking Christians who didn’t understand. It was made clear to them that “Messiah” meant “Christ” (John 1.41), though a previous verse (1.35) had made Jesus the lamb of God. This was not accepted without debate, as other “copyists” had Jesus himself protest it. He forbade others to speak of him as Christ (Mark 8.30) and rejected Davidic ancestry (Matt. 22.43–45, Mark 12.35–37). Contemporaries knew that the house of David had disappeared. The most recent prophets (Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, and Malachi) were ignorant of the Messiah’s Davidic origin.

⁴⁷ Mohammed did not know of the virgin birth by Mary and God. Furthermore, we can read in I Timothy: “...(you must) stop occupying yourselves with myths and endless genealogies, which are more suited to vain speculations than to serving the will of God.”

Matthew (2.1), confirmed by Luke (1.5) and Mark (6.14) tells us that the birth of Jesus took place under king Herod. Similarly, the Gospel of the Ebionites situates the activity of John the Baptist near the Jordan in the time of Herod *king* of Judea. Now, there were two king Herods: Herod the Great who reigned between 40 and 4 before the Christian era, and Herod Agrippa I who reigned between the years 37 and 43 of our era. Which of these two periods does the birth of Jesus fit?

Luke places his birth during a census that took place in the year 6, but he makes Jesus out to be age 30 in the year 29. John states that the Christ was not yet 50 years old when he died; If this death, then, took place between 29 and 35, his birth would have taken place between 21 and 15 BC. Eusebius specifies that according to a false report from Pilate, Jesus died in 21, which seems impossible to him. Irenaeus says (2.22.5) that Jesus was nearly 30 years old at his baptism and nearly 50 at his death. If this baptism took place around the year 29, Jesus would have been born just before the beginning of our era and would have been dead around 49, a date very close to that of the execution of James and Simon, sons of Judas of Gamala.

Ignatius (supposedly the bishop of Antioch but actually a Christian from Philippi) wrote, around the year 150 at the earliest, that the birth of the Christ has been unknown to Satan; the devil was therefore less well informed than the evangelists. Ignatius also added that people objected: “That which I do not find in the archives, I do not believe in the Gospel”, attesting then that today’s skeptics had second-century predecessors.

Luke (ch. 2) places the baptism and death of Jesus under the reign of the emperor Tiberius, between the years 14 and 37. But there were two rulers called Tiberius. There was a Roman procurator, Tiberius Alexander, who served in Jerusalem between 35 and 48 under the reign of Claudius (41–53), who expelled the Jewish followers of Chrestus from Rome in 49. This Tiberius had James and Simon, sons of Judas of Gamala, executed in 47. Luke, in his Gospel, expressly refers to the emperor, not the procurator, but this has certainly produced some confusion. This would be why Tertullian (*Apol.* IX) alludes to a certain Tiberius, proconsul of Africa.

If Pilate had really condemned Jesus, he would have given an account of this incident to the emperor. Since no one had ever heard anything about such a report, the Christians fabricated one; the pagans, for their part, forged another.

Nothing the Gospels teach us is historical; they are simply a witness to Christian beliefs between 150 and 200. They fix certain aspects of the religion to this period. “I should not believe in the Gospel,” wrote St. Augustine, “if I had not the authority of the Church for so doing” (*Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental*).

The use of prophecy

Once the scribes got involved, the biography of Jesus became a scholarly work; they went searching through the Jewish Bible for edifying details they had not found elsewhere. They composed a veritable marquetry — or should we say, a “mosaic”? — from innumerable snippets of text taken from here and there, with no concern other than to prove that Jesus had been spoken of by the prophets long ago. So what if this “waiting game” corresponded neither to reality nor to the original meaning of these out-of-context quotes? The important thing was to confirm their wishful thinking with the help of sacred texts. Thus they managed to create a mystical text that for sixty generations has been regarded as the actual, chronological truth.

Indeed, it is in the various books of Bible that we read — providing that we apply to Jesus texts that are not about him and which were often distorted — that the Messiah is a god, the son of God, begotten for all eternity, creator of the world, incarnated in the womb of a virgin, descended from Abraham, of the tribe of Judah and the root of Jesse, born in a manger between the ox and the ass, adored by the magi, taken to Egypt, returned to Nazareth, and baptized by a precursor; that he spoke in parables, performed many healings, rode on an ass, and took upon himself the sins of the world; that he was hated without reason, despised, betrayed, sold for thirty deniers, whipped, insulted, judged, killed, and crucified; that his clothes were parted, that he was given vinegar to drink, that the earth was cast into shadow upon his death, that he was placed in a sepulchre, that he descended into hell, that he rose on the third day, that he is seated at the right hand of God on an eternal throne, that he is the cornerstone of the Church and the priest of the New Law, and that he will return upon the clouds of heaven.

If Matthew and Luke had Jesus be born in Bethlehem, it's because this village was the hometown of David. If Jesus was born in a stable placed in a cave, it's because other gods (Tammuz, Adonis, Mithra, Dionysus, Hermes, Horus, and Zeus) were also born in that manner. If Bethlehem replaced Nazareth as his place of birth, it's because Jesus could not be allowed to enter the world in such a paganized region (John 1.46, 6.52). If Nazareth was originally chosen, it was to ensure the fulfillment of chosen prophecies just as Matthew (2.23) believed; but since no actual prophecy really spoke about Nazareth, we can assume that the evangelists, having found the definition of “Nazarene” (consecrated to the Lord) in the Jewish Bible, invented a town that didn't exist. It appears, lastly, that Nazareth had already replaced Capernaum, the town of the Comforter which, for Mark, was the hometown of Jesus, though some doubt whether this town existed at the beginning of the first century, and the name could be just a Gnostic symbol (see note on page 90).

It is because David left his home during the night of Passover, was pursued by his enemies, was betrayed by his councillor Ahithophel, and went to the Mount of Olives (II Sam

23–30) that Jesus, having to copy the precedent set by his supposed ancestor, went out the night of Passover, was betrayed by Judas, and went up the same hill.

If Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, is introduced in the Gospels to lay the body of Jesus in a tomb cut into the rock, it's because another famous Joseph placed the body of his father Jacob in the Cave of Macpelah (Gen 47.29–31, 50.14) and because the servant of Yahweh must have his grave with the rich.

This artificial picture, then, corresponds to nothing except for what is said of the Messiah by the psalmists and the prophets. That is why the Jews never believed in this deception, which is as far from biblical prophecy as it is from historical reality.⁴⁸

The Christians borrowed some traits of the Jewish Messiah but neglected essential aspects. In the Psalms (17 and 18) in which he is called Christos-Anointed, the Apocalypses of Esdras, and Baruch, the messianic king places the Gentiles under his yoke. However, according to the Gospels, Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world, and he was defeated precisely by the leaders of “this world”, Herod and Pilate.

The futility of all these efforts

Despite all the legendary and contradictory information on a hypothetical Jesus that has accumulated, we know nothing about him.

We are told that he spent three years with his disciples, but this is not certain; we can just as easily assign single year to the career of this prophet. Whether three years or one year, this seems like a very short time to found a religion and give it deep foundations.

Anyway, during this brief period, Jesus must have been speaking, acting, and writing. Presumably, his actions and words were considered important by his disciples, and they preserved an accurate memory of them. Yet this completely natural supposition is false; the Gospels devote just a fifth of their text to the activities of Jesus; their memory only covers a period of eight days, those which make up the holy “Passion” week. The rest is illuminated only by a few scenes of theological significance that are very rare indeed.

Thus, we have nothing but fanciful birth entries and a narrative of death that appears more or less liturgical from this celebrated life that would have lasted thirty years. The birth is clearly mythological; the death is that of a dying-and-rising mystery god. A number of critics believe that the Passion narrative originally consisted of a separate text independent of the Gospels; that, or the Gospels were either constructed “backwards” from the Passion, or they incorporated this Passion as their conclusion.

⁴⁸ See *Cahier Renan*, No. 35. “Les citations de l’Ancien Testament dans le Nouveau.”

During what period does this information appear? The first Christian writer — the apostle Paul — is unaware of it. The Epistles, published around 145 by his disciple Marcion, were not even augmented with these details by the interpolators that used them. As for the Gospels, they are not cited for the first time until Irenaeus around 177. Contrary to orthodox theories, we think they first saw the light of day around 160 in response to Marcion's Evangelion, and by then had undergone a good deal of motivated reorganization.

We can say that Jesus was not considered to be a human individual for nearly a hundred or a hundred and fifty years after Herod and Pilate — not even by the Christians. He was their god, and he had been a man since the beginning. He could not have been transformed into a lamb or a heavenly child, and if his disciples had had the attachment to him that is credited to them, they would not have shown such indifference toward his life and his memory for more than a century. If, however, he had originally been a crucified god, we can better understand that he could have been confused with a man condemned to death by crucifixion.

The cross of Christ was not a gibbet

The oldest manuscripts of Mark are unaware of the Resurrection; the first Christians did not believe in the resurrection of bodies, but simply the survival of the soul and its return to heaven the destruction of the body, its prison. The death of Jesus the man is the simplistic, popular interpretation of the misunderstood myth about the death of a mystery god destined to be reborn. The mystical cross existed long before Christianity, and it has been conflated with the Roman instrument of torture. It was still a symbol at the turn of our era, as the evangelists have Jesus say: *If any would follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross each day, and follow me* (Luke 9.23, Mark 8.34, Matt. 16.24). By no means were all these cross-bearers crucified. Jesus the god was speaking of his sign, the cross of light, a symbol of victory and not of death.

It is certain that the first Christians did not consider the cross of the Christ to be a symbol of condemnation. The Reverend Father Daniélou agrees: *Though the sign of the cross reminds us of the gibbet on which Christ was hung, this is not the origin of the sign of the cross that was branded on the forehead of the first Christian community... It may be regarded as a certainty that the sign of the cross that was used by the first Christians indicated, to them, the name of the Lord, i.e. the Word, and it signified that they were consecrated... The cross symbol originally appeared, not as an allusion to the Passion of the Christ, but as an indicator of his divine glory... The four arms of the cross appear to be a symbol of the cosmic nature of this salvific act.*

This admission is simply the observation of an undeniable fact that can be witnessed in numerous, very old Christian texts.

In the same journal in which the article by P. Daniélou appeared (*La Table Ronde*, Dec. 1957), Adolphe Dupront, professor at Sorbonne, wrote: “It is certain that the cross of the passion is that of our modern lamentations; in ancient centuries, the cross was foremost the cross of glory. The infamy of the gibbet assigned to it is an evolution of usage or a masochistic reversion...”

The Passion texts are full of impossibilities and contradictions;⁴⁹ they owe much to ancient rituals and legends; they are the reflection of a primitive mentality. The early Christians knew so well that the drama of the passion and of salvation were heavenly that they made no pilgrimages to Jerusalem to pray at the supposed tomb of Jesus. It was only around 338–347 that the legend of holy places was forged and that the “true” cross was discovered along with those of the two thieves. It was only in 692, at the Council of Constantinople, that the Church decided that the cross ceased to be allegorical and became a representation of reality. But what reality? An imaginary reality constructed little by little by the Christian masses, a “spiritual reality” without any historical foundation.⁵⁰

Around 360, Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures* 13–33) informs us that “the Saviour suffered to appease the sky and the earth by the blood shed on the cross” (what blood, and on what cross?), and he adds: “He was not a sheep, not a man, and not an angel. *He was a god made man.*”

The god become man

It seems, then, that we can affirm that Jesus the man is an artificial construction. We do not know how, when, or where he was born; he showed himself to be at once a prophet and messiah, a king and a high priest, a maker of miracles and helpless in the face of violence, adored by the masses and abandoned by them, surrounded by symbolic characters (the persecuting king, the evil high priest, the wicket Roman, the Judaeen traitor, and so on). He disappears under the spotlight of criticism; he exists only in the nighttime of faith like the

⁴⁹ See “*Jésus a-t-il été crucifié?*”, *Cahiers Ernest Renan*, Nos. 6, 7, and 8; see also page 90.

⁵⁰ Writing around the year 200, Clement of Alexandria does not mention the cross as a Christian symbol, although he does list the barque, the anchor, the harp, and the dove. The Latin cross does not appear in the Catacombs until around 450; when it does, it is still symbolic and embellished. The famous labarum of Constantine (312) is not at all the Christian cross; it is the solar cross, the imperial cross of victory, not the cross of someone crucified. The crucifix does not appear until the sixth or seventh century of our era. It is only in the fourth century that the infant Jesus appears in the Catacombs with his parents, the ox, and the donkey.

ghost of Hamlet's father. He is a product not of the Holy Spirit but of the human spirit. He is, in the Paradise of legends, a precursor and companion to William Tell.

In the face of this uncertain man who recruits followers, journeys around Galilee, gives speeches, and gathers crowds, there is the god who performs miracles, comes back to life after dying, and ascends into Heaven. These two beings are different: the god cannot be a man, and the man cannot be a god. However, they are joined by the Gospels to create a single character: Jesus Christ. What happened in the imagination of the mystiques who thought they were experiencing the beginnings of Christianity, or who imagined those beginnings in the course of their ecstasies, their visions, and their dreams?⁵¹

Gods are created by men, and Jesus was a god "from the start"; he precedes the human story; he is the object of a cult. One would need to be a god in order to understand and write the story of gods; the story of the Christ resembles those of other gods; we know only pieces. We observe that Jesus is a god of mystery, gnosis, and magic, who has many traits shared with the Oriental gods who preceded him and were still contemporary with him.

He donned various aspects that suggest syncretism involving Gnosticism, which was adapted to vary different religious systems. Forms and names vary, but the background remains or becomes the same. This god — whether he is that of Simon Magus, the Naassenes, or Saturninus, or of other sects, whether he is called Jesus or something else, and whether or not he was incarnated as a human — descended from the sky to bring salvation to believers. Originally immaterial, he took the form of a man and was miraculously born from a virgin. Then he was given a human father and a genealogy. Finally, the time and place of his birth was thought to be known. We witness this progressive transformation from god to man in the Christian texts. The conception of a divine human is quite a common occurrence in the history of religions. The Christian legend, seen from this angle, provides nothing original. Many biblical characters are ancient gods; among the most recent, we may include Esther and Mordecai, who are none other than the ancient goddess Ishtar and the god Marduk.

Marcel Granet, in his *Religion des Chinois*, recounts an ancient Chinese myth: *The birth of Houji was an act by Heaven; it is Heaven that breathed the celestial spirit into his mother. Houji had all the qualifications to be associated with the cult of the Celestial Sovereign and to be the mediator of his race in the eyes of the Supreme Power. This did not prevent people from continuing to say that this son of Heaven was*

⁵¹ For the Rev. Fr de Grandmaison, *the union within the same pre-existent person... of two natures — the divine and the human — is a mystery beyond the minds of men. There can therefore be no question of directly justifying the doctrine of the Incarnation, of showing it through intrinsic reasons, as the only truth. That dogma is received by the Catholic Christian Church, the depository and interpreter of the authentic doctrine from Christ* (op. cit., p. 211). The argument from authority is evidently the only way to overcome the problem.

also the son of man. It would have been a scandal that Jiang Yuan, virgin and mother of the god Houji, had had no husband. Thus, Houji was able to have a father according to men. There are traditions that say Di Ku, the husband of Jiang Yuan, had some difficulty before he yielded to the divine miracle. However, he did yield, and he was rewarded by being regarded as the patron saint of married life.

In the Greek world, Zeus himself descended to earth. There he shared the bed of Alcmena, and from this union was born Hercules who, like a messiah, was to end the Age of Iron and bring about the Age of Gold. Before saint Joseph, the spouse of Alcmena, Amphitryon, yielded to the god who had chosen his wife as a temporary mate. The prophet Tiresias addressed Alcmena in these terms: *Rejoice, for you have given the world the most valiant of sons... you will be venerated by the people of Argos.* Later, the angel Gabriel would say to the Virgin Mary: *Your son will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High; all generations will proclaim Mary to be blessed.*

Ulysses, Romulus, Alexander, Solon, Pythagorus, and Plato all had extraordinary births. The example of Plato is quite striking: according to Diogenes Laertius, his father was warned of his birth in a dream, and on the order of Apollo, he delayed his union with Perictiona and did not approach her until she could give birth. Similarly, Joseph (according to Matt. 1.24, 25) *did not know his wife until she had given birth to her son Jesus.* Origen believed (C. Celsus, I.37) that the story about Plato belonged to the category of myths intended to explain the wisdom of great men.

More than two thousand years ago, most Greeks believed in the union of Zeus with mortal women and in the birth of Hercules, Perseus, Aeacus, Minos, Hermes, Dardanus, Tantalus, and others whose earthly existence and adventures were considered to be true. Today, many Greeks no longer believe in these legends, but they have replaced them with that of Jesus.⁵²

The fusion of God and man

It does not seem sufficient merely to have shown that Jesus is a god made man, and that this transformation is commonplace in the history of religions. We would like to demonstrate how that could have occurred.

⁵² We also find the idea of incarnation in numerous other religions, notably those of India. Similarly, an Egyptian inscription has the god Ammon use the following words when speaking to Ramses or Sesostris: *I am your father; I have begotten you in god; all your members are divine; it is I who produced you... by possessing your noble mother.*

First of all, it is necessary to recall that the biography of Jesus was fabricated in large part thanks to an extraordinary compilation of choice biblical citations, usually altered or interpreted in a tendentious manner.⁵³

Next, the human character of Jesus was undoubtedly composed in part using elements taken from the life of John the Baptist, transferred from the latter to the former.⁵⁴

Finally, the point that we would emphasize the most is that there were other Jesuses who participated in the creation of the Gospel Jesus. A large number of people were named Jesus, and many of those pursued turbulent political and religious lives. Forty-one bearers of the name Jesus can be found in Jewish histories written in Greek;⁵⁵ some of them played a role in the lead-up to the war of 66–70. All were Jews; none can be considered the Jesus of the Gospels, but some of the details in their biographies show up in the New Testament.

It has been asserted — correctly — that Flavius Josephus did not know about Jesus Christ, but we have not mentioned that he had contact with several people named Jesus. He mentions (*Ant.* 20) Jesus son of Damneus and Jesus son of Gamaliel who, before the Jewish revolt in 62 and 63, were both high priests and fought by recruiting supports from among the rabble. He also knew of a Jesus who was high priest at the same time as Eleazar at the start of the revolt. He had as an enemy another Jesus, son of Sapphias, an adventurer himself (*Vita* 66) who was a leader of the poor and the boatmen of Lake Tiberias. This Jesus was undoubtedly confused with Jesus son of Toupha (or Saphat) who enjoyed brilliant, but brief, success against the Romans (*War* 3.450).

We find in Josephus (*Vita* 105) a Jesus who was chief of a band of eight hundred brigands in the Ptolemais district, first an enemy of Josephus and then his ally; a Galilean Jesus, chief of six hundred armed men with a residence as strong as an acropolis inside Jerusalem; a Jesus, son of Ananias, who prophesied the ruin of Jerusalem and its temple for more than seven years

⁵³ See *Bulletin Renan*, No. 34. In his edition of *Evangile selon Marc* (Rieder, 1929), P. Alfaric noted the phrases borrowed from the Jewish Bible; he counted 240 of them.

⁵⁴ See “Jean le Baptiseur”, *Cahier Renan*, No. 10.

⁵⁵ “Inventaire de quarante et un porteurs du nom de Jésus dans l’histoire juive écrite en grec”, W.-L. Dulière, *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1959.

and who was killed on the walls in the course of the siege. Many other Jesuses could be added to this list, but we have mentioned only the most distinctive ones.⁵⁶

It seems incontestable to us that, perhaps due to the name they shared and the fact that they appear in the works of Flavius Josephus, all these Jesuses who lived during the same period contributed to the creation of a legendary man who, at least in part, became the hero of the Christians.

The Galileans were not Christians.

As is often stated in the Gospels, our Jesus was himself a Galilean, a friend of fishermen and the poor. He was often seen near the lake, where he recruited his “disciples” — Galileans for the most part. He was executed with two malefactors. The episode of the ear severed during his arrest preserves the memory of an armed resistance that is not surprising, seeing that Jesus had said: *let him who does not have a sword sell his tunic and buy one* (Luke 22.36). He had foretold the destruction of the Temple, and the priests said: *If we allow him to continue, the Romans will destroy our city and our nation* (John 11.48). Jesus claimed to be “king of the Jews” and declared that he brought not peace but a sword (Matt. 10.34). He entered Jerusalem as the “Son of David”; he instigated disorder in the precincts of the temple, where he overturned the merchants’ tables (Matt. 21.12). The legend puts him in contact with an Eleazar and even makes him a high priest.

⁵⁶ There were also two high priests named Jesus under Herod and Archelaus. The first, son of Phabi, around 27 BC; the second, son of Sie, in 4 AD.

We are brought back to the time of the Jewish War by a certain passage in Matthew (23.31–36) in which an alleged prophecy (obviously imagined after the event) is given by Jesus to the Scribes and the Pharisees: “You are the sons of those who killed the prophets... You will kill and crucify some of them... that on you may come all the righteous blood poured out on the earth from the blood of Abel the righteous to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you slew between the sanctuary and the altar.” These Jewish martyrs were those of the high priest Ananus in the year 62, and this Zechariah was the one cited by Josephus (*War* 4.5.4) who was assassinated by the Zealots during the siege of Jerusalem (in 67 or 68). Attempts have been made in vain to link this allusion by Jesus to an earlier Zachariah. This passage, then, post-dates the year 70 AD.

The prediction by Jesus on the fall of the Temple (Matt. 24.29) is unknown to Paul, to the fourth Gospel, to Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus of Antioch. According to W.-L. Dulière (his message to the congrès d’Histoire des Religions de Marburg, 1960), this prediction would have been inserted later into the Synoptics and would have been originated with Jesus son of Ananias (*War* 11.300–314), who was brought before Albinus... [source text illegible]

In Acts (1.11, 2.7), the disciples of Jesus are called Galileans. Luke narrates (in 13.1) the murder of Galileans by Pilate *who mingled their blood with that of their sacrifices*. The Galileans are in Jerusalem with Jesus (John 4.45). Pilate speaks of Jesus as if he were a Galilean (Luke 23.6). During Jesus' trial, Peter is regarded as a Galilean. In Acts (5.37), an allusion is made to the revolt of Judas the Galilean.

These observations are, in our opinion, extremely important, since too many people confused Galileans and Christians — which we insist is a mistake. Writers in the first century, as in the second and even later, did not confuse them.

Epictetus only knows of the Galileans (Arrien, *Discourses* IV.VII.6) but not yet of Christians.

Justin mentions a sect of Galileans to whom he denies the name "Christians" (*Dial.* 80).

For Hegesippus as well (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* IV.XXII.7), the Galileans were a Jewish sect, not a Christian one.

In the *Acta Theodati Ancyрани* (XXXI), we learn that the pagans called Jesus a ringleader of the Galileans. [Translator's note: The source of this citation appears to actually be the *Acta Sanctorum*.]

Even if the deathbed cry attributed to the emperor Julian is apocryphal, the use of the term "Galilean" to designate the Christian Jesus survived in pagan circles (Gregory of Nanzianzus, *Orat.* IV). [Translator's note: These four preceding paragraphs are plagiarized almost verbatim by L. E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1956, p. 13.]

Character confusion

In light of this evidence, it is assumed that confusion took place — far removed from these events in time and space — between the god named Jesus and various men in Galilee who had the same name, and who raised rebel armies to throw off the Roman yoke. Following their defeat and flight, this sect or these groups of assassins or zealots must have come across people among their Jewish co-religionists and among the pagans who revered a certain Jesus who was god. It was doubtlessly easy for them to believe that this god was their messiah who had ascended to heaven.⁵⁷ There were certainly bitter disputes between these new Christians, these Jewish Christians, and the Gnostic Christians. We find traces of this in the Epistles and in Acts. We know how and by what compromises Jewish Christianity finally triumphed.

⁵⁷ [Translator: This footnote was cropped out of my copy of the French text.]

To provide justification, the Jewish Christians went looking in Josephus for written information that would confirm their tradition. The events that they claimed to report had taken place at least two generations earlier; they would have lacked greater certainty about dates and places, but happily, they had in Josephus an undeniable witness from which they could extract the essential details they were missing. They would also have had their choice of several Jesuses. Thus, the Jesus constructed by the evangelists resembles several homonymous characters, but he is not any one of them in particular.

Though this Jesus stood in opposition to Jesus the god because he was human, and to Christianity because he was a Jewish patriot, he appeared in the holy books as the founder of a new religion. This is an astonishing, incredible situation that raises questions. How could a man so incompatible with Christian doctrine have been inserted into the Gospels?

We are reduced to guesswork. What we know is that Jesus the man appeared in Christian texts only after Jesus the god. What is no less certain is that the publications of Marcion (the Pauline epistles and the Evangelion) preceded the Catholic Gospels. These early Christian works were Judaized through numerous interpolations that turned a divine being into a man of flesh who played a role in Jerusalem.

According to Epiphanius (*Haereses* 30.14.16.34), some Ebionites called Jesus the Son of God and rejected the title Son of David, while others saw him as the Son of David as opposed to the Son of God. A third group, gnostic, tried to reach a middle ground between the two by proclaiming that the Christ had descended and become incarnate in Jesus. God and man were thus unified for the duration of the man's earthly life.

Christian communities from diverse backgrounds that had united to form the Great Church after fighting each other were obligated out of necessity to accept quite disparate religious texts. Followers of John the Baptist needed to have the legend of their great man; it had been reduced, but enough remained so that the essential role of the Baptizer would not be forgotten. The Galileans needed to see recollections of the exploits of their leader; they were happy to later learn that his great deeds had been mostly of a spiritual nature, that his defeat had been a guarantee of their redemption, and that his death had been a brief disappearance, since he was now a god who awaited them in heaven.

Two factions of “gospel” scribes

These pious modifications were certainly not as simple, fast, and premeditated as they appear from our perspective, but it seems certain that they were made. Irenaeus, who died around the year 200, avers that the Gospel of Mark was written to correct the errors of

Cerinthus, Matthew's was written to convert Ebionites, Luke's to correct Marcion, and John's in opposition to Valentinus.⁵⁸

It was undoubtedly during the second half of the second century that the Gospels were harmonized, fusing Jesus the man with the gnostic god in the texts to create a single character named Jesus Christ. *Despite his apparent unity, the Christian hero is easily divided into two completely different beings* (see note on page 91).

The saviour god descended from heaven in human form; the Galilean was born from other humans. The god returned to heaven; the body of the man was buried.⁵⁹

Jesus the god was the divine Son, an emanation of God the Father. The followers of the Galilean imagined that the spirit of God had come to be incarnated in the body of a child, or that God had adopted the man as his child at the moment of his baptism. Others made him into a son of David even though that royal lineage had long been extinguished.

The gnostic god was opposed to the Prince of this World, the God of the Jews, the Law, and the Sabbath. The Jewish rebels adored Yahweh and respected the Law and its rituals.

The god brought spiritual salvation to all the nations; the Galilean sought only the material liberation of Israel.

The gnostic Jesus declared himself to be the bread of life, despised the flesh, and gave assurance of the resurrection of souls. His kingdom was not of this world. Jewish nationalism, on the other hand, recruited Jewish partisans who were to help establish a new earthly Jerusalem that would be independent and free of all the pagans.

The god Jesus wanted to be referred to only as the Christ. He desired peace and advocated forgiveness for injuries as well as poverty. The warlord claimed himself to be messiah and seized authority through force.

A gospel legend has preserved the memory of these two Jesuses and of the predicament in which Pilate found himself. For when the Jews brought him one, he had another already detained, "a famous prisoner" we are told (Matt. 27.16-17). He then said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Jesus Barabbas (Son of the Father) or Jesus who is called the

⁵⁸ For Cerinthus, the divine Christ had descended into the man Jesus. For the Ebionites, it was the Holy Spirit. For Marcion, Jesus was the Son of God. For Valentinus, Jesus was an emanation from the divine Pleroma who came to save Sophia. Attempts were made to prove via the opposite via Scripture; i.e., that Jesus was a man of flesh chosen by God.

⁵⁹ The Gospel of John (3.13) explains that *no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven*, which proves that the early Christians believed only in a man who could ascend to heaven. Around 300, Rabbi Abbahu declared: *If a man says, "I am God," he is lying; "I am the Son of Man," he will eventually have to repent of that; "I will ascend to heaven," he is telling you something he has no ability to perform.*

Christ (Messiah)?” Of course, Pilate could not have taken hold of the son of a god, but this episode establishes that there was a difference between Jesus the god and Jesus the man early on, even with regard to the crucifixion.

This legend can equally be explained in the following manner: Pilate is the earthly archon, the devil who thought he had gotten his hands on the son of God, but this celestial prisoner escaped him. In fact, he let the spiritual Christ go and kept only his body, his appearance. This explanation is confirmed when we read the fourth Gospel. The Christ who (in 2.4) had said to his supposed mother: “What is there between you and me, woman?” said to her at the moment of his death on the cross (19.26–27): “Woman, here is your Son” and to John, “Here is your mother.” This was the spiritual being who speaks to human beings by making them understand that they can be related to each other, and if they are interested, he leaves them his body at the moment that his celestial character abandons his fleshly appearance to return to heaven.

Justin said to Trypho: “It is your own race that recognizes that Jesus is the Christ while maintaining that he is a man born from humans”, which means that others did not believe that Jesus the man was the celestial Christ.

And Irenaeus: “Those who separate Jesus from the Christ and who prefer Mark are refuted by Mark.” This confirms that the Gospel of Mark was corrected to refute the “false” doctrine of the followers of Cerinthus, who lived around the year 100.

So if, as it is certain, some Christians were confused between a god and a man, we understand the advice given in all seriousness to critics by Albert Schweitzer: *The defenders of the historicity of Jesus must seriously consider the importance of their position... they run the risk of supporting the historical roles of a character who could be completely different than what they expected when they set out to defend that position.*⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the following objection could be made: rather than seeing Jesus as a god transformed into a man, couldn't one support the existence of a man who was deified? Moreover, is it possible to prove that Jesus the god existed?

We would respond that whenever two characters are fused together, one must find out which was the earliest; and in the case of Jesus, it is undeniable that the god precedes the man. However, for a man to be deified, he needs to have existed at the very least. And we have no proof that he did; on the contrary, we have every reason to think that the Jesus of the Gospels is a theological creation.

⁶⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *Gesch. d. Leben, Jesu Forschung*, p. 151.

The contradictions of Jesus the man

It would be easy to show the *contradictions* that exist *between the Gospels* concerning the earthly existence of Jesus. They are well known and do not speak in favour of the historicity of the Christ. We would rather underline a fact that is often ignored, which is the *opposition* that appears between certain remarks by Jesus himself as they are reported in the Gospels. Everything seems to be as though the Christian texts contained two Jesuses who were opposed to each other.

One announces to the Samaritan woman that the hour has come to worship God in spirit and not on Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem. The other teaches in the Temple, and his disciples frequent the Temple.

One says that man was not made for the Sabbath. The other visits the Temple on the Sabbath, and when he is dead, women wait until the Sabbath has passed in order to bury him.

One comes “eating and drinking”, in opposition to Jean the Baptist, who fasts. The other goes to the desert to fast for forty days, and his disciples fast.

One says that new wine should not be poured into the old wineskins of the Law and the Prophets. The other insists that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.

One says to honour one’s father and mother. The other says to leave them and follow him.

One asserts that the flesh profits nothing. The other promises the resurrection of the flesh and offers his own as sustenance.

One proclaims, “Blessed are the meek! Thou shalt not kill! Those who take the sword will perish by the sword.” The other commands, “The one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one!”

One refuses the kingdom of this world and the title of Messiah. The other is crucified as king of the Jews.

Faced with these fundamental contradictions — of which we have given just a few examples — one is justified in asking those who believe in a historical Jesus, “Which of these two Jesuses, each as believable as the other, is the true one?”

Vestiges of the earlier divine Jesus

The existence of Jesus the god is indisputable in our view, not only in terms of the problem that we have already exposed, but also due to facts we shall now recall.

According to the Epistle to the Colossians (1.15-17), *the Son is the image of the invisible god, the firstborn of all creation. All was created through him... and for him. He existed before the universe.*

The Gospel of John confirms that Jesus existed before the birth of Abraham (8.58), and while he was praying, he said to God his Father: *Give me the glory I had in your presence before the world existed* (17.5).

The early beliefs of the Christians thus included an eternal being — a god, not a human.

According to Barnabas, around 115, Joshua was the predecessor of Jesus in the flesh (12.20), which confirms Justin (*Dial. Trypho* 113). But Joshua (the same name as “Jesus”) certainly originated as a solar deity; when he was humanized, he began his career on the day appointed for choosing the paschal lamb and ended it Passover. He chose twelve men, like Jesus. The ritual of circumcision was called the ritual of Joshua the Son, and according to the Talmud, there was a “week of the Son” (or of Jesus the Son) related to the redemption of the firstborn.⁶¹ Joshua (Jesus) was considered the Prince of the Presence, the Metatron who was assimilated to the archangel Saint Michael as well.

An older version of the Epistle of Jude (verses 5 and 6) gives the following text: *I want to remind you, though you know already, that this Jesus* (i.e. “Joshua” instead of “the Lord”) *by saving his people out of Egypt a second time* (Moses having saved them the first time) *destroyed the unbelievers and put in chains the angels who did not keep their places for the great day of the judgment...* There is no longer any doubt: this pre-Christian Jesus is a divine being.

One can read in the Sibylline Oracles the following passage: *Someone came back down from heaven, an eminent man who stretched out his arms on the fertile wood, the greatest of the Hebrews, the one who stopped the sun long ago...* We thus learn that the Joshua of the Old Testament was a god related to the cross and the sun, who descended from heaven to mankind.

This is confirmed for us by the forty-second of the Odes of Solomon, the text of which is as follows:

*I stretched out my hands and consecrated myself to the Lord,
for stretching out one's hands is a sign of consecration,
just like an expansion of wood
on which the man was suspended, upright by the wayside*

This is confirmed by other verses:⁶²

⁶¹ According to Robertson, *Pagan Christs*, p. 165-166, who refers to *Tal. Bab. Tract. Baba Bathra, Yevamoth, Joseploth*; also pointed out by Herschon, *Genesis with a Talm. Comm.*, p. 24–26.

⁶² The Greeks themselves knew of a stoppage of the sun. According to a hymn by Callimachus, the sun stopped his chariot to watch Artemis dancing with her nymphs.

*My hands extended on the sign of Him
And my extension is the upright wood (Ode 27).
I extend my hands in the ascent of my soul (Ode 35).*

The character who is speaking is a Saviour, a Son of God; he is not crucified by men, he consecrates himself to God his Father through the cross. These Odes, which were probably written around the year 100, reflect a cult preceding that of the Gospel Jesus,⁶³ who did not foresee his own death on the cross but rather chose the cross “during his lifetime” as a rallying point. In effect, he would have said to his disciples: *Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not my disciple* (Matt. 10.38).

THE SON OF GOD AS SAVIOUR CAN BE FOUND:

a)...in the *Apocalypse of Elijah* (§20), where it is said that “the god of glory sent his son into the world” and that “he was transformed into a man as he approached us”.

b)...in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (a Jewish-Christian work from the early second century) where the “Beloved” together with the Holy Spirit have the form of an angel and worship the Great Glory (i.e. God). Even though people were present at the birth of Christ, at his execution and at his resurrection, this Christ is divine; he left his Father to descend to earth, passing through the seven heavens that he later crosses in the opposite direction to return to his Father and sit at his right hand. This Christ is a gnostic Jewish god who preceded Christianity. An angel warns Isaiah that the Prince of this world will kill the Son of God and hang him on a tree.

One is justified to note in this context that the names “Christ” and “Jesus” appear in this text in an astonishing manner.⁶⁴ First, an angel explains to Isaiah (9.5) that he will be able to hear the name of the Lord Son of God only once he has been stripped of his flesh. He announces to him that the Lord will descend to earth at the end of days and that, once he takes on a form resembling a man and is believed to be of flesh, he will be called Christ (9.13). In his vision, Isaiah rises higher than the sky and is “transfigured, becoming like an angel” (9.30). The eyes of his spirit are opened and he glimpses the Great Glory, the Father of the Lord, who is sending Christ the Lord, the one who will be called Jesus, on a mission to earth.

⁶³ Harnack wrote: *These Odes already contain so many Christian elements, that the historicity of Jesus appears to be seriously threatened.* (*Die Oden Salomos*, 1910).

⁶⁴ See Marc Stéphane, *La Passion de Jésus*, p. 69, 70, 71, 124, 248, 249, and 250. He observes that the Latin and Slavic texts of the *Ascension of Isaiah* nowhere contain the names “Jesus” or “Christ”.

It is possible that the names “Lord”, “Christ”, and “Jesus” were added to the original text.
⁶⁵ It is nonetheless instructive to know, even if through interpolation, that the Son of God had the title of Lord and that the name Christ was given to his human appearance, which was later also called Jesus. We learn from Acts (2.36) that its redactor believed at one point that it was God who had made Jesus “Lord” and “Christ” after his crucifixion. The Epistle to the Philippians (2.7–11) also shows that the name of Jesus was given to the “god in the form of a man” by Christians after his “death”. We find it is a god we are dealing with.

If the names “Jesus” and “Christ” do not constitute interpolations in the text of the Ascension of Isaiah, this text — earlier than the Gospels — preserves for us a memory of a gnostic redeemer god who was given the titles of Lord, Christ, and Jesus.

c) ...in the Epistles of Paul, where it is declared (I Cor. 2.7–80 that *if the Princes of this world crucified the Saviour of Glory, it is because they did not know the mysterious Wisdom of God ordained since the origin of time for our glory*. Thus, this divine son, god of mystery was originally quartered in the heavens by the stellar demons. This incident, transposed on earth, becomes a Roman crucifixion, the celestial archons being transformed into human enemies of whom Jesus said: *Forgive them, O my Father, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23.34).⁶⁶ Paul is a companion of the cross of Christ (Gal. 2.19 and 6.14), a situation we are not presented with in the Gospels.

d) ...in the *Didache* (16.6), where it is announced that at the end of time, the sign of the opening of heaven will appear.

e) ...in the *Gospel of Peter*, where the glowing cross identifies with Christ; it is the Word, and he is the cross, which is confirmed in the *Acts of John* (*This cross is not a cross of wood.*⁶⁷ *I am not the one who is on the cross... They will call me something else that is terrible and unworthy of me.*)

⁶⁵ Most importantly, the name “Jesus”, which appears later than “Christ” in our texts.

⁶⁶ Before Jesus, Orpheus himself was immolated by the Princes of this world, the Titans, who dismembered and devoured him. Let us also not forget — as Guignebert incidentally points out (*Probl. de Jésus*, p. 94) — that *the outstretched arms of the cross symbolize mystical regeneration and that, in some amulets, the tree of the cross of Osiris is fastened to human arms*.

A papyrus contains the following formula: *May this wine become the blood of Osiris* and another shows Osiris in the form of a wine cup, giving his blood to Isis and Horus to drink. Moreover, we know the words to say over the cup: *Seventeen times: You are wine, and you are not wine but the head of Athena. You are wine, and you are not wine but the entrails of Osiris, the entrails of Iao.* (V. Guignebert, *Le Christ*, p. 373) So the Son of God was compared to the cup (*Odes of Solomon* 19).

⁶⁷ This cosmic cross of light (which would later be the cross of the Manichaeans) should undoubtedly be represented by a cross of wood with equal branches; later, it was replaced by the crucifix (Council of Constantinople, 692). It is only in the 12th century that Christ on the cross appears at the doorway of a church

f) ...in the *Acts of Philip*, which describe a voice that cries: *I will have pity on you on my cross of light*.

g) ...in the works of Justin (*Apol.* 60.5) who, interpreting Plato, says that God extended his Son into the world in the form of a cross.

These examples could be multiplied.

Hippolytus preserved for us a *Hymn of the Naassenes*, a sect that was probably pre-Christian, in which Jesus asks his Father to let him descend to earth to bring salvation to men:

Behold, Father! Pursued by evil, she (the soul) still goes astray upon the earth far from your breath; she seeks to escape bitter chaos and she does not know how to get across it. For that reason, Father, send me! I will descend bearing the seals. I will traverse all the Aeons. I will reveal all mysteries. I will manifest the forms of the gods and teach the secrets of the holy way under the name of Gnosis. There can be no doubt that this Jesus is a gnostic deity.

A magical papyrus, edited by Wessely, contains the following incantation: *I banish you in the name of Jesus, god of the Hebrews.* Confirmation of this fact is given to us by Acts (19.13): *Some Jewish exorcists... dared to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were possessed: I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.* Although placed under the auspices of Paul, this Jesus, god of the Hebrews, existed at least from the beginning of Christianity. When the twelve apostles appear in Matthew's Gospel for the first time (10.1), they receive the power *to cast out unclean spirits and to heal any disease.* These miracles were accomplished "in the name of Jesus" (Luke 10.17; 16.17; 9.49; Acts 3.6), the name that was "above all names, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven, on earth, and in the underworld" (Phil. 2.9–11). Is it possible to doubt that we are dealing with the name of a god?⁶⁸

We have seen that some Jews believed in a warrior-god named Jesus, but it is certain that other Jews were attached to a very different human Jesus. Paul's disciples were outraged that one could preach *another Jesus* other than their own (II Cor. 11.4; Acts 17.3). And so little about Paul's Jesus was human that the apostle was taken for a *preacher of foreign divinities* in Athens (Acts 17.18).

⁶⁸ Around 150, Justin writes that *throughout the entire world and in Rome, many of ours, Christians, exorcized demoniacs by the name of Jesus Christ crucified under Pontius Pilate.* We see that the name of the god has been replaced with that of the man-god, the latter being localized in history. Once he became a Jew of Jerusalem, Jesus would reproach himself (in the Gospels) for having a demon inside him and for casting out other demons by Beelzebub. This fable shows that, for the scribes in Jerusalem, the cult of Jesus was pagan (Beelzebub was a rival of Yahweh's; he was the Philistine god of Ekron, a city where the Jews went after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans).

Jesus as a “collective being”

Another figure of Jesus, intermediate between that of the god and that of the human, must be noted. In certain Mandaean, Gnostic, and Pauline contexts, Jesus replaced the Mother of All Living, Miriam, who had symbolized the Community, the Church. She was considered to be the spouse or fiancée of the Christ, the Mater Ecclesia, the Virgin unsullied by any impure contact; she was also called Jerusalem. She became the body of which the Christ was the head and of which the believers were members.

He was thus a collective being (I Cor. 12.12–30; Rom. 12:4–5), and Paul said: *You are all together the body of the Christ.*

This Christ might not have been a god, but he cannot be regarded as an individual person who had lived at a certain time in some Judaeen town.

It is not only in this sense that Jesus can be regarded as a collective being; he incorporates numerous religious entities. He is often God himself (the Alpha and Omega, the Lord, the King, the Supreme Judge); he is His emanation (the Son, Wisdom, the Angel of the Covenant, the Mediator, the Husband, the heavenly High Priest, the second Adam...); he is the Messiah (Abiad, David, Siloh, the Seed, the Councillor...); he is the Victim (the Servant, the Just, the Lamb, the Scapegoat, Abel)... This simple enumeration shows the work, the efforts of the imagination, the dreams, and the confusion that created and enriched him.⁶⁹

The saviour god who precedes the supreme God

To Jews, Yahweh was the only god. To Christians, the saviour god had always been the Christ. Which of the two came first in the new religion?

The Christians never referred to God the Father by the name Yahweh; they put belief in Christ the Saviour before belief in the supreme God. It was the suffering and rising god who converted the masses, not Yahweh or the supreme god.

The mystery gods weren't creator gods, and they weren't regarded as the masters of the universe; they limited themselves to ensuring the salvation of their followers. They co-existed with each other but were not incompatible. Nothing prevented their worshippers from improving their own odds by being initiated into numerous mysteries.

Even so, the pagans had no need of a supreme god above their saviour gods, just as the Christians had no need of a god above Christ, and the Jews had no need of a divine son under

⁶⁹ Another example: when St. Paul speaks of *Jesus our Easter*, that cannot be regarded as a historical event. Thus Henri Labbé said (*Bulletin Renan*, No. 76, Dec. 1960) *it is a unique adaptation of an ancient liturgy to new beliefs*. See also: Jean Pain, *Jésus dieu de la Pâque*, Rieder.

Yahweh. It was in the nations of the Gentiles, in the Diaspora that the beliefs of some groups evolved. Some knew that great gods existed alongside the Christian god, and little by little, Jesus became the son of a god. But this transformation should not blind us to the fact that the beliefs of Christians were originally focused on Christ.

Christ, the object of a cult, was a god from the start. It was he who appeared to Saint Paul in a luminous form. The gospel of Paul was not that of God, but that of Christ, whom he regarded as a Saviour.

The Epistle of Titus (2.13), like the Second Epistle of Peter (1.1), refers to “our great god and saviour Christ Jesus”. Ignatius (*Ep. to the Trallians* ch. X) speaks of atheists who believed in Christ but not in God. Tatian, while distinguishing Christ from God, speaks of the “suffering god”, and Melito of Sardis declared that “God suffered at the hands of Israel”.

The title of Lord (Kyrios), applied equally to both Yahweh and Christ, adds to the confusion between these two gods, but the name Yahweh was not able to find a foothold in Christianity. The first Christian baptisms were made in the name of Christ alone; baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity came later. The trinitarian formula was still unknown to Eusebius prior to the Council of Nicaea (325).

Therefore, it was not Christ who was added to God in Christian dogma. For almost the entire second century, the catholics did not have a precise doctrine of God. It was God who infiltrated the religion of Christ. And Christ was also a god, not a man.

Jesus Christ was not a human Messiah.

At the turn of our era, no unique, certain conception of the Messiah existed. The Jews did not possess an orthodox doctrine of the Messiah. It is not even likely that they believed in a suffering and atoning Messiah around the 30s. In any case, an idiosyncratic messianic belief could not have been transformed into a universal religion of salvation; it served only to give it such a religion a Jewish veneer.

The character of Jesus is never completely identified with that of the Messiah; he accepts with difficulty some traits of the Messiah while rejecting some of its essential aspects. He does not allow himself to be regarded as the Messiah, and he is compared more to the Son of Man, who is a heavenly being. He claims to have a divine mission, not a political role.

Pilate found “no guilt in him”, which proves that he was not the “king of the Jews”.

By definition, the Messiah is one who receives an anointing; but Jesus was never subjected to this ritual, at least on earth — not even at his baptism.

In a prayer to God (Acts 4.25–27) in which Herod and Pilate symbolize the kings and magistrates of Psalm 2.1–12, the Christians say, “...your holy Servant Jesus whom you have

anointed". The anointing is therefore heavenly, as the Epistle to the Hebrews confirms (1.9): "...your God anoints you with the oil of gladness..." and (1.3) Jesus "in these last days... is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the highest..."

If Jesus was anointed on earth, it could only have been part of a ritual for perpetuating his death and resurrection, i.e. as a dying and rising god. Among the Egyptians, the anointing of the god was a daily occurrence; the oil was kept in an alabaster jar. According to the *Apocalypse of Moses*, Adam was anointed with oil after his death by the archangels with a view to his resurrection. It was thus with Jesus. Admission of this is provided in a mysterious manner in Luke (7.37–47), Matthew (26.6–12), and Mark (14.3–8). A crying woman washes the feet of Jesus with her tears, covering them with kisses and anointing his head with ointment and expensive perfume kept in an alabaster bottle. What could be the reason for this, except that the statue of the god, believed to be dead, must be reanimated? Even supposedly dead, the god speaks and explains that this took place for his burial. The scene was misunderstood and disguised because it came from a heretical group; indeed, it takes place at the home of Simon the *leper*, and the woman is a sinner. This individual who will die, be buried, and rise again is the image of the heavenly anointed one (messiah); he is not a human messiah (see note on page 91).

The word "Messiah" only appears twice in the New Testament (in John 1.41 and 4.25), and each time, the author explains that "Messiah means Christ", which proves that the reader would not have known that and would not have understood this late designation. Unfortunately, it is due to this assumption by a copyist that Christians thought "Messiah" whenever they read "Christ", and this confusion endures today. We find, in Acts 17, the origin of a complementary confusion; Paul is made to say, "The Christ is this Jesus whom I proclaim to you."

So Jesus became Christ, just as Christ became Messiah and then Son of God.

CONCLUSION

We start by observing that the state of our documentation on the origins of Christianity is lamentable. An important mass of manuscripts has disappeared. Only the vestiges of a great body of literature remains available to us. By way of example, let us bring up what Tertullian says (*Adv. Valentin.* 5). He tells us that the previous generation consisted of four illustrious writers: Justin, Miltiades, Irenaeus, and Proclus. Of Justin, only a single manuscript survives.

We have only a few fragments of Miltiades. Irenaeus survives in only a single Latin translation. The work of Proclus is entirely lost.

The Christian texts we studied today (the New Testament and the Church Fathers) were preceded and accompanied in the second century by wide-ranging apocryphal and heretical literature that has been destroyed; our actual texts are certainly not early; they have been repeatedly abridged, augmented, interpolated, and corrected. They have undergone these changes in order to lend support for a dogma that has sought definitive stability, as well as to give them an air of dignity. It suffices to note the dangers posed by the history of Christianity as it is explained to us or as some try to reconstruct it.

The materials that remain at our disposal are more profitable for the details they contain than for the edifice they appear to construct. To avoid building theories on the shifting sands of self-serving and erroneous testimonies, we must avoid two pitfalls:

- a) The tendency to overestimate the value of what has survived, to place too much importance on such-and-such formula or some particular writer.
- b) The tendency to underestimate the importance of opinions that have disappeared, that survive only in fragments, or that we know about only through their opponents.

It is not for us to discuss Christian dogmas (above all, Catholic ones); they are basically nothing more than metaphysical gambles in service to a hypothesis of existence. That God exists, and that he had a son born of a mortal woman who remained yet virgin, and that this son wiped away the sins of men through his sacrifice — these remain a private matter between it God and his believers.

But if we assert that Jesus thus conceived was an actual man who lived under Herod and Pilate, and who was crucified in Jerusalem between 29 and 35 of our error, the matter becomes historical, public, and open to debate.

Now, this human existence of the Christ is not supported by any evidence; it is contradicted by the earliest Christian documents and by part of the Gospels.

Given the actual state of our documentation and in accordance with the aforementioned considerations, we can only sketch out a working hypothesis based on the following data:

The Christian religion is not based on events, unknown to history, that would have taken place between 29 and 35. It has borrowed traditions and rituals from sects that existed before it.

Christianity was not born in Jerusalem. History has no knowledge of Jesus Christ. Christology was established in advance of him. The Naassenes, Ophites, Sethians, and Perates were pre-Christians.

Saint Paul — unlike the classical individual we know — played a major role in the founding of Christianity. Marcion, the editor of the Pauline epistles, is a witness to these beginnings.

The divine person of Chrestos — from which we get our word “chrétien” — is another vestige. His confusion with Christus prepared the way for his assimilation with the Anointed, i.e. the Messiah. This evolution must have taken some time, since, at the time of Lactantius around 280, the pagans were still calling Christ “Chrestos”.

We now read in our texts that the god of Paul was the Christ; Paul was, around 50–60, the apostle of the first Christians, who were later declared to be heretics by the new Jewish Christians. Paul’s Christians were Gnostics; their saviour god could not have been a man; they established communities and Churches throughout the Near East (in Asia Minor, Greece, Alexandria, and Rome, but not in Palestine).

When Jesus appears in the Gnostic and Christian literature — not before 115 — he is god; he probably comes from unorthodox Jewish sects, and his cult must have been secret originally; Samaria, Syria, and Asia Minor could have been his chosen countries. A mystery god, he is confused with the heavenly Christ, a divine Aeon and emanation from God the Father.

Syncretism asserts itself during the time of the Gospels;⁷⁰ myths of the saviour gods contaminated each other reciprocally, and sacred names were conflated with each other. The legend of the Christian god resembles those of Attis, Adonis, Osiris and Mithras. Many

⁷⁰ We believe that no Gospel existed in its written form before Marcion. Marcion averred (according to Adamantius) that the first apostles preached without writing, and that the names of the evangelists were Judaizing deceptions.

Catholics today refuse to admit it to themselves, but the Church Fathers observed this fact despite their disapproval.⁷¹

The cultural legend of Jesus the god made him speak and act like Yahweh, but no one ever believed that Yahweh was a man. He does, however, get involved with humans many times. Other gods who came down to humans were given tombs; as it was with Attis and Osiris, so with Jesus.

Jesus the god, ritually sacrificed, took on numerous forms. He was the lamb slaughtered for the Passover, the scapegoat, the red heifer, the fish, the serpent, and the man. No one thinks Jesus could have been one of these animals; we regard them only as symbols. Why is the man excluded from this symbolism? By what evidence can we isolate one of these representations and guarantee that it is the only one that corresponds to reality?

Furthermore, it is the same with the four evangelists. Mark is symbolized by a lion, Luke by an ox, John by an eagle, and Matthew by a man, but the characteristics of the man prevailed among the four, while the images of animals they assumed, like the shirt of Nessus, associates them with the four cosmic archons (Ialdabaoth, Iao, Adonai, and Sabaoth) who ensure the spread of the earthly Gospel in the four directions of space.⁷²

Jesus the man was introduced timidly in the New Testament around 145, and his biography took form little by little through borrowing from works of the greatest variety.

In the Gospels, his personality remains very hazy, sometimes contradicting itself. The occasional mentions concerning the period of his existence are subject to caution and are not based on any historical witness. Nothing establishes that he lived and died under Pontius Pilate. The Jewish books place him between 106 and 79 before our era and in the year 130

⁷¹ Justin (*Apol.* 66), having quoted the words from the Last Supper according to Luke, adds this reflection: *This the demons have imitated and reproduced in the mysteries of Mithras...* This is confirmed by Tertullian (*Prescription Against Heretics* 11), who writes that the devil *imitates the sacraments of God in the idol mysteries* and gives the mysteries of Mithras as an example — *the offering of bread* in particular. Justin also knows (*Apol.* 54) that the demons who knew the prophecies invented Dionysos, son of Zeus, introducing wine into his mysteries and claiming that he ascended to heaven after being torn to pieces and eaten. In his *Apology* (21), he also declares that when the Christians speak of the virgin birth, resurrection, and ascension, they are claiming *nothing stranger than the story of the son of Zeus*, and he adds that Jesus had in common with Hermes the fact that he was the Word and the Messenger of God; and with Asclepius, the fact that he healed diseases. Lastly, it is logical to say that, Jesus being the Word, all those before him who lived by the Word were Christians, even if they passed for atheists. Socrates and Abraham were Christians.

⁷² See *Bulletin Renan*, No. 67, the article on “les Anges”. Furthermore, according to the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (*Naphtali* 8.4), demons and wild beasts flee the righteous man.

afterward. Numerous characters go by the name Jesus, and the traits of many messiahs have undoubtedly been attributed to him. We do not possess a single “Biography of Jesus”; we have only “stories about Jesus”, full of symbols and allegories.

Around 160 or later, the man and the god were reunited in a single character called Jesus Christ, a strange creation that only mystics could have come up with and promoted; strange but comprehensible when we remember the two-faced god Janus and, closer to home, the two-headed eagle. Indeed, this conception met with opposition — on one hand, by the Ebionites who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, and on the other by the Gnostics who denied a body of flesh and blood.

Jesus Christ was born from the imagination of pious people who, lulled by their dreams, made use of legends, visions, gossip, and even historical texts that they interpreted and utilized in the same manner in which they had used the prophecies of the Old Testament.

The successive creators of the Gospel heroes made use of:

- a) liturgical booklets from mystery religions, collections of divine oracles, sayings, prophecies, arcane texts, Greek legends, etc.;
- b) oral traditions and ritual practices provided by both Gnostic sects and paganized Jews;
- c) Marcion’s *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon*, as well as Gnostic texts;
- d) texts about the life and activity of John the Baptist and the Mandaean religion;⁷³
- e) works by Flavius Josephus.

At the same time, strictly speaking, neither Christianity nor its earliest writings came from the Palestinian world; their origins must be sought not only among the beliefs and religious practices of neighbouring countries (Syria, Asia Minor, and Arabia), but also in those of Iran and Mesopotamia; additionally, the civilizations of Athens and Alexandria exerted considerable influence on nascent Christianity. It is largely true that early Christians were

⁷³ V. Stahl, *Les Mandéens*, Rieder, Paris (19th), and *Cahier Renan*, No. 10: “Jean le Baptiseur”. The famous Marcionite date for the descent of Christ to earth (year 15 of the reign of Tiberius) has become the date of the manifestation of John the Baptist in Luke. Subsequently, the character of Jesus relegated that of John to the rank of precursor and took over part of his biography.

recruited from among former proselytes released from the authority of the Jerusalem Temple,⁷⁴ but we must not forget all the pagans of the regions we just mentioned who practiced pure syncretism, were adepts of the mystery religions, or who read Philo and other Greek authors.

It is not out of the question (as the Epistle to the Hebrews may seem to indicate) that the Christian community had to welcome the remnants of Jewish sects who had left Judaea at the end of the first century or after 135 with no hope of return, offering them a new priesthood and a tabernacle “outside the camp”. The capture and destruction of Jerusalem was regarded by Jews as the ultimate catastrophe. It was between 70 and 135, and not earlier, that the events of the Passion of Israel took place. Two folktales resulted in the birth of the Messiah at the moment of the Temple’s fall. The Jews were waiting for the earthly arrival of a heavenly Messiah at the end of the world. When some discovered that their earthly messiahs failed in their objectives — in other words, that Yahweh had not approved — and that the end of the world so often announced had not arrived, they thought that perhaps their God wanted to be understood and worshipped in another way.⁷⁵

A new religion, still in its formative stage, presented itself. At the risk of polluting itself, it opened its doors wide to all the malcontents, the disinherited, the discouraged. It spread hope and promised salvation.

It is precisely the intrusion of the masses into a mystery religion that allowed the entrance of the man Jesus into a cultural system that had originally not included him.

Indeed, Christianity had originally been reserved for initiates; its teachings were secret. One *needed ears* in order to hear (Matt. 7.6), and allusions to mysteries were made public only in parables so that *none of those listening would understand* (Luke 8.10). The initiate identified himself with the deity (Gal. 2.20; Rom. 6.4; Col. 2.12); he danced around the divine

⁷⁴ This origin would explain why Jewish crucifixion (execution followed by a display of the corpse) would have been unknown to those who only knew of Roman crucifixion. In addition, the Acts (18.24–25 and 19.1–10) seem to indicate that proselytes in Ephesus had abandoned Judaism and gone over to the Mandaism of John the Baptist and to Montanism. Paul went looking for followers in the pagan religions; he held classes in “the house of Tyrannus”, where “house” means “temple” and Tyrannus (according to a suggestion by Léon Herrmann in *Cahier Renan* No. 24 on *saint Paul*) could have been the god Men. Paul had also been troubled by ceremonies in honour of Artemis, and one of his companions was named Artemas. At Lystra, he was welcomed by the priest of Zeus Propoleos, who mistook him for Mercury. We cannot understand Paul without admitting that he was up to his neck in syncretism.

⁷⁵ In the Jewish domain, the character of John seems to have been in contact with the descendants of the “Essenes” of the Dead Sea — indirect contact that could have come about in the second century AD between each other’s writings and traditions.

representation as well as the hosts of angels in heaven (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, XII). The Christian initiation rituals are known to us in broad terms.

Origen made the following observation, which goes quite far: *The crucifixion, the resurrection, and the incarnation are well known, but that there should be certain doctrines, not made known to the multitude, which are revealed after the exoteric ones have been taught, is not a peculiarity of Christianity alone...* (*Contra Celsum*, I.7).

Faced with the rising tide of superstitious and ignorant neophytes (children, women, slaves...), the initiates lost control. Their religion, deprived of esoteric exposition, materialized through vulgarization. Their pearls of symbolism were *cast before the swine who trampled them* (Matt. 6.6). The cross of light and tree of life became implements of torture; the god of victory and salvation gave way to a beaten and crucified man for whom a biography was sought and found.

It is likely that the descent of the divine Christ to earth and his appearance to Paul became, in the Gospels, the appearance of that same character to the holy women and the disciples. First, the story of the god's "Acts" during his short stay on earth and his return to heaven were written. Once people believed that he had been a man who performed miracles, they had him be baptized by John the Baptist, born of Mary, and clothed in genealogies. The Passion of the god and his holy week were transformed into a political process and an infamous execution on the gibbet. The return to heaven of Jesus the god became the Ascension of the resuscitated man — an extremely useful way of dealing with the earthly disappearance of a man who had come back to life and whom everyone would have wanted to see, or of a body whose tomb could not be pointed out.

Ultimately, Christianity was formed alongside an undulating, manifold Jesus who was adapted to the most disparate of sects. His human existence is an illusion, a literary creation of theologians, a creation that is itself the late result of countless compromises textual adjustments.⁷⁶ The Church was built independently of him. It adopted rituals and myths that it transformed in order to create its sacraments and derive its dogma.

Thus, our conclusion lies at the point of confluence and agreement between the three rationalist trends we reported. Those who believe in the existence of a man named Jesus will

⁷⁶ *Cahier E. Renan*, No. 28, "Interpolations du Nouveau Testament", I. Les Epîtres (4th quarter, 1960). II. Les Actes (1st quarter, 1962).

Why did the Jews modify their Bible just like they did pagan works? The question merits examination. Let us simply remember that they believed and said that Plato was the imitator of Moses, and that they turned the Roman Sibyl into a herald of Israelite beliefs. Their goal was to conquer the Gentiles or to justify their religion to the latter. The redactors of these texts were probably Jews from the Diaspora.

see the human traits of the Christian god which, though they are certainly there to be found, are borrowed and do not correspond to any historical reality. Those who regard Jesus as a “rebel” Jew admit that this figure, barely sketched out in the Gospels, is in contradiction with the divine Christ and is incompatible with the founder of a universalist religion. Finally, those who advocated for the myth admit that the legend of a god has been embellished through the considerable effort and perseverance of scribes and theologians obsessed with the image of an earthly Messiah.

III. The Church's Beginnings

Religion is a doctrine. The Church is only an institution.

Vacherot

The papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.

Hobbes

The traditional history of the Roman Church itself also deserves to be examined closely. The circumstances of its foundation, the establishment of its hierarchy, and the elements that gave it power and dictated its politics must be extricated from the embellishments with which the imagination of ecclesiastical writers has overwritten them.

“Once upon a time,” we are told, “Christ gave Saint Peter the authority to govern the entire Church. Saint Peter passed on this authority to his successors in Rome. Thus, the Pope is the vicar of Christ according to the will of God.” It’s time for us to leave “Alice in Wonderland” and embark upon a journey through History.

We have already shown⁷⁷ that: (a) the famous words of Jesus addressed to Saint Peter (*You are Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church.*) have no historical value and arise from an interpolation; (b) no contemporary witness attests to the journey of Peter to Rome; and (c) the Papacy was instituted neither by Christ nor by Peter.

But let’s suppose for an instant that a Messiah named Jesus had charged Peter with creating a Church and being its leader. How would events have proceeded? Peter would have undoubtedly obeyed, but having received his instructions from Jesus in Jerusalem, it is in Jerusalem (seat of the first community according to legend) where he would have organized the Christian church. Jesus never told him to move the seat of this Church to Rome. Why would Peter have done so? Why would he have chosen Rome over Antioch or Alexandria? Rome, a pagan environment in which the Christian sect would have lived under the direct scrutiny of the imperial police just like the other Jewish groups.

Specifically, we have seen⁷⁸ — again, according to tradition — that there would have been a bishop of Jerusalem. He was named James the Lesser, brother of the Lord. Epiphanius and John Chrysostom maintained that he had been made bishop by Jesus himself, while Jerome asserted that he had received his seat from the Apostles. In the first instance, Christ would

⁷⁷ *Cahier E. Renan*, Nos. 15–16, “Les apôtres et saint Pierre” (4th quarter, 1957).

⁷⁸ See chapter I.

then have named two “popes”: one at Jerusalem, the other at Rome. In the second, the Apostles would not have accepted the nomination of Peter to Rome and would have replaced him with James in Jerusalem.

To this difficulty we may add another. James would have been succeeded upon his death by Simeon, cousin of the Lord, at the same time when “all the Church” was being led by the two grandsons of Jude, the brother of the Lord.

As a result, there would have been both a dual Papacy in Jerusalem and a rivalry for primacy between Jerusalem and Rome. At any rate, there is no need for worry; none of these hypotheses are true.

History tells us that the Christian Church put under the authority of the Roman Pope is the continuation of the Church that existed in Palestine and sent the apostles Paul and Peter to the capital of the Empire, as well as numerous missionaries. However, there is no basis for such an assertion.

We have observed that Christianity was not born in Judaea, and that the first Christian Church, the Mother Church, was not based in Jerusalem. As Guignebert (who was still a believer in the historicity of Jesus) said: *Christ neither founded nor wanted a Church; this is perhaps the most certain fact that is evident to anyone who studies the Gospel texts without bias; and, frankly speaking, the opposite supposition creates a historical absurdity; all the ingenuity of the theologians can do nothing with it.*

The Church — or rather, the Christian institution — emerges like life itself in many places simultaneously and in many forms. The Christians appear on the historical stage a bit like the Celts or the Ligurians. Their presence is noted, but where they come from exactly isn’t known. Communities large and small appear in the early second century, sometimes solidly unified but sometimes divided by doctrinal quarrels around the eastern Mediterranean: Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. These communities were independent from each other, and they claimed different founders. They didn’t always read the same holy books or the same Gospel, but their readings and their liturgy were in Greek.

Rome was just one of the apostolic Churches; if it had a “bishop”, Alexandria and Antioch had a patriarch. Legally, nothing gave the head of the Roman community the right to assert its primacy over all the Christian Churches. Yet, that is just what it attempted and succeeded at doing.

The starting point for this Roman policy of achieving supremacy was after the appearance of Marcion and his anti-Jewish Christianity, i.e. around 150. Marcion had published several Epistles from Saint Paul and the unique Gospel of the Christians that Paul had spoken of. Thus, two Christianities were in competition with each other in Rome and throughout the world: one of Gnostic origin (Marcion) and one of messianic origin (the Roman community).

However, it should be remembered that our simplification of the facts applies only generally, for there were many Christian sects as well as Gnostic Judaism.

That was when the name “Christian” appeared and the Gospels called Mark, Matthew, Luke, and then Pseudo-John were written in opposition to Marcion’s Gospel — not as the texts we possess today, but in a much simpler form. It was in 177 that the four Gospels were mentioned for the first time by Irenaeus.

In the face of divergent views on certain rituals (the celebration of Easter, for example) as well as the emergence of Montanism and its progress, compromise and unity of action became necessary. The monarchical episcopate was created in Rome around 140. Around 165, the doctrine of the Trinity was established thanks to Montanus’s Holy Spirit, which was added to the Father and the Son.

The episcopate did not come into being suddenly; it developed bit by bit. Originally, there were priests who presided over the banquets of Christian communities; there were many in Rome. To maintain relationships with the communities in other cities and countries, or even with the political authorities, the chief priests would choose a representative who would become their delegate. His position, occasional at first, became permanent. Then the mandate given to the delegate faded in the face of his authority, and he came to be recognized as the leader.

That is why Clement was the secretary of the Roman community around 140, while around 160, Polycarp and later Hegesippus met with Pope Anicetus in Rome. However, Dionysius of Corinth in 170 and Polycrates in 190 wrote not to Pope Victor but to the Church of Rome. Not long after this latter date, Victor, followed by Zephyrinus and Callixtus I emphasized their authority and were the community’s true leaders.

The lists of supposed “popes” are not “certain”; they come from Hegesippus who, around 160 assembled the pieces and from Irenaeus who, around 192, gathered other lists. Eusebius did not mention Hegesippus’ list, which he knew, preferring the different list of Irenaeus’. In any event, everything that predates the year 140 is worthless. The list of the first “bishops” of Rome is made up of names covering dubious characters who were made out to be the successors of Saint Peter. Irenaeus’ list speaks of “priests” who were at the head of the Church. The title of “bishop” did not yet exist, and that of “pope” would take another five centuries to assert itself.

Among these phantom “popes”, a certain Clement⁷⁹ who would have held the position during the 90s and would have written the *Epistle to the Corinthians* stands out. Now, according to the *Shepherd* written around 140 in Rome by Hermas, a Clement is presented as the community of the Roman community charged with correspondence with the other Churches. That is to say, the *Epistle to the Corinthians* that is attributed to him could not have been written until about 140. So we may admit that given the actual state of our documents, this Clement was secretary of the Roman Church whose leader was the brother of Hermas and was the first Pius. This was not in 90, but in 140; this is the the same Clement mentioned above.

The Christian literature came about amidst the quarrels of the second century. At first, it was exclusively in Greek; the beginnings of Latin literature date perhaps from the time of bishop Victor and Tertullian to around the year 200. The offensive of the Roman community continued from that date.

Around 198, Victor, a priest of Rome who usurped rights he did not possess, excommunicated the bishops of the province of Asia who celebrated Easter according to the Jewish Passover, on the day of the spring full moon, instead of on the Sunday following the full moon. Polycarp, the Asian bishops, and Irenaeus protested this measure, which was contrary to their own faith, and they did not recognize Victor as having the right to give them orders.

Around 210 and for the first time, Caius, a Roman priest, claimed that he was able to show off the trophies of the apostles Peter and Paul.⁸⁰ Tertullian, his contemporary, who was unaware of this matter, attests the double execution of Peter and Paul in Rome. These two fictions were jointed to form a legend that still litters the history books of all countries with Catholic majorities.

⁷⁹ In the Clementine “Recognitions”, Clement is the immediate successor to St. Peter. According to Hippolytus, he was the third bishop of Rome. According to Eusebius, Julius Africanus, Jerome, Irenaeus, and Hegesippus, he was the fourth pope after Peter, Linus, and Anacletus.

⁸⁰ It was Clement (140), Dionysus of Corinth (170), and Irenaeus (170) who proposed the idea of the Roman Church’s foundation by Paul and Peter. The community of Antioch also claimed to have been founded by Peter, but its importance evaporated before the power of the communities in Rome and Alexandria.

We recall that the first non-Jewish bishop of Hadrian’s Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina) was a certain Mark — homonymous and contemporaneous to the Mark of Alexandria, which causes no end of trouble — who was chosen around 136 and died a martyr under Antoninus around 155. He would have been a contemporary of Roman “bishops” Pius and Anicetus. Their relationship is never mentioned; but the bishop of Jerusalem would have had a stronger claim to primacy than his Roman colleagues.

In the 200s, the Christians made sure they had separate cemeteries and tombs for their “bishops”; the first thus interred was Callixtus (222). Around 220, they were beneficiaries of a liturgy from Hippolytus that became Mass. Emperor Severus Alexander allowed the Christians into his court.

At this time, the bishop of Rome exerted a considerable advantage. According to Saint Cyprian, the emperor Decius had said that he would sooner face a competitor in Rome than a bishop; the community in the capital numbered 20,000 members by then. Rome was the crossroads between the various Eastern provinces; it handled, through Carthage, relations with Africa and — through Alexandria and Antioch — contacts with Egypt and the East.

The hierarchical evolution continued in a way that benefited the bishops of major cities all over. They provided major and minor services to the leaders of the small communities, whose resources were reduced. Rich and settled in comfortably, they were easily recognized as superior to others.

About the year 250, Gallic Christianity, which had been Greek and Eastern until then, started to become Latin and Roman.

Around 254–257, Stephen, the leader of the Roman Church, declared himself Peter’s successor and claimed primacy over the bishops of the other communities, but they rejected this claim. Firmilian, bishop of Cappadocia, was outraged at the “stupidity” of Stephen. Then, in 258, thanks to the legend whose foundations had been laid by Caius and Tertullian almost a half-century later, relics of Peter and Paul were discovered in the Catacombs.

From 303 until 313, the Christians, following their expulsion from the army (where their pacifism would have set a very poor example), were persecuted regardless of the sect, and thus became the first sufferers of martyrdom under Diocletian (295) — African soldiers who refused to bear arms. Between 304 and 307, the episcopal seat of Rome was vacant.

When Constantine made his entrance into Rome (312), the bishop Miltiades was already in possession of the Lateran Palace, where he held a council the following year.

The famous “edicts” of Milan (311–313) were probably the result of negotiations between Constantine and the Christian Church, since the response from the latter was not long in coming. A council held at Arles in 314 declared that those who left military service in times of peace would be excommunicated. Young Christianity, as soon as it was receiving the protection of worldly arms, renounced its ideals of peace and non-violence in order to arm its own members. The difficulty that had hitherto prevented official recognition of Christianity fell away. Catholicism placed its troops and its hierarchy in the service of Caesar in order to become the only recognized religion. Thanks to its fanaticism, it had succeeded where other religions — like those of Mithras and Isis, which were too tolerant — had failed.

St. John Lateran's Basilica was inaugurated in 324, twelve years after the one that had been dedicated to St. Peter, which may be a significant fact.⁸¹ In 336, the relics of St. Paul were separated from those of St. Peter; the former were returned to the Via Ostiensis, while the latter were transferred to the Vatican. The triumph of the Jewish-Christian partisans of St. Peter over the followers of the Gnosticism of St. Paul was definitive; it permitted the centralization in Rome of the organism destined to control the Catholic Church of the West in the wake of the transfer of the imperial capital to Byzantium (330).

Constantine was a superstitious man, a follower of the solar religion. He believed in haruspicy and judged it to be both legitimate and necessary to assume the supreme pontificate of pagan religion. It is because he considered himself equally to be the natural leader of Christianity that he afforded the right of jurisdiction to the bishops, presided over councils, arbitrated in disputes, and sought to stamp out heresies.

From 350 until 360, the West fell under the domination of Constantius II, an Arian who had already been ruling the East; the Church ran the great risk of seeing heresy triumph, but it was already organized well enough to put up resistance and emerge victorious. In 369, its influence was such that Valentinian made Damasus, bishop of Rome, the judge of the other bishops. Thus, the preeminence of the leader of the community was legally recognized and confirmed by the political authorities.

Nine years later, in 378, this official recognition would effectively be emphasized. A rescript by Gratian gave the prefects of Italy and Gaul the order to carry out the disciplinary measures decided upon by the bishop of Rome. Of course, the following year, the East had its own emperor and never accepted Roman dominance; but in the West, the supreme authority of the leader of the Church of Rome dates to this year, 378. We can say that it was at this time that the institution that would be called the papacy was born. This would happen, not because of its spiritual life, but as a result of the material constraints it would be dealing with.

The Church is modelled on the organization of the state. The diocese represents the *civitas*, the archiepiscopal province replicates the Roman province, and the bishop of Rome, God's vice-regent, imitates the *Divus Caesar*.

It wasn't until 382 that the emperors would abandon the pontifical robes and proclaim the separation of paganism and the State, thus leaving the supreme pontificate in the hands of the Catholic hierarchy; the latter had nothing to do with Jesus, Paul or Peter; it was created bit

⁸¹ It may be equally significant that neither church or basilica originally bore the name "Jesus".

by bit under the pressure of circumstances, and it would never have triumphed had that not been intended and enforced by the emperor.⁸²

Eventually, the ambition of the popes would go beyond this spiritual supremacy. They needed their own territory to become independent from the emperor, whether in Rome or elsewhere. We know that in the eighth century, the Church managed to acquire an actual territorial State that allowed it to exercise temporal power of the kind Jesus the Galilean would never have granted to Rome-Babylon.

The papacy sought to justify its existence, whether through Peter's status as "the rock", or by making fake decretals in the ninth century. But these arguments, though they strengthened it, had not created it.

In reality, the papacy is an institution absolutely opposed to the practices of the early Christian church and the ideals of the Christ whom it claims to serve.

Georges Ory

⁸² The title of Pope (of Rome) did not receive its current meaning until about the seventh century. The word "papa" (father) was applied to all bishops for the first five centuries.

Supplemental Notes

Page 24 — Origen wrote on the subject of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: “One of the presbyters said that the man who descends from Jericho is Adam, Jerusalem is Paradise, Jericho is the world, the bandits are evil powers, and the Samaritan is Christ” (*Homily on Luke 34*). and “if an Israel exists in the spirit world and a city of Jerusalem in heaven, it follows that the cities of Israel would have the heavenly Jerusalem as their capital, and it is in this sense that we understand everything about Judaea that we believe was spoken by the prophets in their mysterious stories.”

The exact citation of Heracleon that we reiterated is this: “Capernaum refers to the lower parts of the world, the material to which he (Christ) descended. And since this place was not suitable, he is said to have done and said nothing in this place.” (Origen, who recites this passage, adds, “At this place, see if it isn’t necessary to hear, through the brothers of Jesus, the powers who descended with him and who were not invited to the wedding feast...”)

Origen’s celestial geography use I Enoch as one of its sources. He writes (*Homily on Numbers*): “Earthly things are an image of earthly realities... the heritage of the land located in Judaea, called the Holy Land, is an image of heavenly things...” See in the same sense the Epistle to the Hebrews 895. “As in Judaea all places have names, perhaps there will be major differences between locations in the celestial regions... perhaps not only the cardinal points, but the stars and all celestial bodies have names. On these names, the book called the Book of Enoch contains numerous secret and mysterious details” (Origen 28).

The *Naassenes* believed that the Jerusalem below was not the city located “in Phoenicia, but the changing world to which the Jerusalem above was opposed” (Hippolytus, *Elenchos* 5). Babylon and Egypt were also symbolic places. The twelve tribes were the twelve natures of souls.

P. 44 — Lousy reminds us (*Hist. et Mythe*, p. 25) that the name Isaiah “is exactly the same, in meaning and composition, as that of Jesus or Joshua, the two names differing only by the distribution of their components. Joshua = Yahweh saves; Isaiah = saves Yahweh”. And Justin shows (*Dial.* 113) that Jesus is the same person who appeared and spoke to Moses, Abraham, and the other patriarchs.

Jesus is a Hebrew name — Iesous in its Greek form, and later Latinized — which was never utilized in its Jewish form to designate the “founder” of Christianity. It is a quasi-translation into Greek of a Hebrew word that means “Saviour”. It is the same name as Jason and Hosea. Around 250 BC, the Septuagint called Joshua “Jesus”; he was the Prince of the Presence, the Angel, the Metatron who resembled the Logos (see *Cahier Renan* No. 19).

P. 46 — Well before Clement of Alexandria, St. Thomas, a skeptic, thought the same thing; but a copyist decided to convert him and inserted this imaginary conversion into chapter 20 of the fourth Gospel, the only one that mentions the incident.

P. 48 — Similarly, during the classical era, Crete had stories about the infancy of Zeus and his amorous youth, and his tomb could be seen on Mt. Juktas.

P. 52 — Epiphanius (*Pan.* 2914) tells us that John the Baptist and James, brother of the Lord were Nazarenes, and Hippolytus (*Haer.* 29.6) declares: “The early Christians did not call themselves Nazarenes, for the Nazarene heresy existed before Christ and did not know him.” We may appreciate how this “heresy” preceded all dogma. Furthermore, most philologists have concluded that the form employed by Matthew (2.23) could not mean “of Nazareth”.

The fact that the Gospel story of Jesus is reduced to a birth and a death may suggest that the two stories are not about the same person. The contrast is great indeed between the young god with a life full of promise and the adult ignominiously crucified. Both the god-child and the crucified god are known from the history of religions, and they are different gods; see *Bulletin Renan* No. 37.

P. 54 — One may observe, when reading the Passion stories given in the Gospels, that neither Pilate, nor Herod, nor the Sanhedrin really condemn Jesus. The motifs of his supposed condemnation are contradictory and inconceivable (see *Cahier Renan* No. 100). Furthermore, modern criticism has detected many layers and interpolations in the Passion texts.

P. 62 — Allusions to these two Jesuses can also be found:

— in the Epistles of Paul, which attest to the manufacturing of two very different Gospels.

— in Justin, who knows that some Jews believe in a heavenly, non-human Christ.

— in Irenaeus, who knows that for some, the Christ and Jesus are two different individuals.

— in Tertullian, who reminds us that Marcion asserted that there were two Christs — one heavenly, the other earthly.

P. 73 — The god Tammuz was the object of an annual lamentation. His statue would be washed, perfumed, and washed before his death. His resurrection was celebrated. Male and female mourners represented the dead, who were supposed to go up to heaven with him. In the same way, the renewal of the Passion of Osiris is mimicked with his statues; he was sometimes represented in the form of a crucifix.

Interpolations and forgeries. — In the language of today, an interpolation is the insertion into a text of passages that are foreign to it. This process has been used since Homer, and it produces strange results. That is why the famous “coffin texts” from Egypt are the result of

extensive interpolations with the goal (that was achieved) of allowing even the most humble mortal to benefit from rituals hitherto reserved for deceased members of the royal family. The interpolations of the New Testament established Christianity by fusing the myth of a god with the legend of a previously unknown human messiah.

Speaking of literary frauds, we should mention the *Carta Dominica* (*Lettre du Christ tombée du ciel*) of which Christ is the purported author; the *Correspondence of Paul and Seneca*; the *Donation of Constantine*, fabricated four centuries after that emperor's death; the *Liber de Duplici Martyrio*, published in the fourth volume of *Patrologie de Migne* under the name of St. Cyprian and whose author was Erasmus; the *Letter from Pope Anastasius II to Clovis*, written in the 17th century by orator Jérôme Vignier; the *Donation of the Royal Estate of Issy* to the abbey of Saint-Vincent-et-Sainte-Croix, signed by Childebert I and dated to 558 but in reality the work of the monks of this abbey, which had by then become the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés; and the fake *Diplôme de Dagobert* created by a monk to grant immunity to the Abbey of Saint-Denis. These frauds are recognized by critical Catholic scholars.